THE BLACK AESTHETIC:

A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

by

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TO MY FATHER

AND

ALL MY TEACHERS

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INTRODUCTION: THE BLACK AESTHETIC — A SURVEY

There has been a strong tendency in the criticism written by black people of their literature to seek to argue the exclusiveness of that literature. The notion of a black aesthetic, of an exclusively negro literary manner has been expressed in diverse ways by writers as far apart in time and space as W.E.B. DuBois and Ayi Kwei Armah, Wole Soyinka and Richard Wright, Amiri Baraka and Leopold Senghor.

In exploring the concept of a black aesthetic, it would be best to begin with the Afro-Americans since it is they who first express awareness of the paradoxes of writing in a language which in its general everyday forms and in many of its specifically literary styles belongs traditionally to someone else, indeed to an adversary. To succeed within the tradition is merely to invite censure as a slavish imitator, a criticism which is clearly present in this comment on the Caribbean poet, Derek Walcott, by the critic R.J. Owens:

> One is aware .... in Mr. Walcott of almost everyone. This would not matter, particularly, if the local poet while feeling an affinity with some English poet, later developed away from his reminiscent manner and found his own voice. But it would seem that some of them simply have no further idea of poetry than to produce jackdaw collections from other poets.[1]

While on the other hand, a refusal by the black writer to avail himself of the resources of that language, that tradition which is not his own, means a failure to utilize a very significant part of the means available, indeed a failure to express an important part of his experience. In the case of the Caribbean poet this refusal could reduce him to silence.

The problem which black critics have sought to resolve in the notion of a black aesthetic is in part a version of the familiar literary problem which Thomas McFarland labelled in an article in New Literary History as "The Originality Paradox"

> Originality, as he suggested, is an analogue of heroism and individuality, the "good book" in Milton's unforgettable words, is "the precious life-blood of a master spirit" and its reality is set against that of mass experience ..... Armouring himself in the conception of originality, the aspiring creater has simply "denied", in the Freudian sense of defense mechanism, the cultural reality around him and thereby continued to produce.....
>
> The "negative influence of the past" reveals itself, in other words, in the treasuring of "originality" and a concomitant denial of the tradition.[2]

Some Afro-American poets and critics have been in recent years aggressive in denying the relevance of Anglo-American literary traditions. Their claim of a separate thus "original" aesthetic can be seen, in McFarland's terms, as the consequence of the "negative influence" of the mainstream which they so stridently seek to disown. Thus Addison Gayle, Jr., an important theoretician of the Black Aesthetic, writes:

> The black writer at the present time must forgo the assimilationist tradition and redirect his art to the strivings within the race — those strivings that have become so pronounced, here, in the latter half of the twentieth century. To do so, he must write for and speak to the majority of black people; not to a sophisticated

> elite fashioned out of the programmed computers of America's largest universities.[3]

Dudley Randall, another theoretician, is even more blunt in his separatism. He adversely criticizes the work of Melvin Tolson, which he compares with the poetry of Milton and T.S. Eliot, as being too full of "learned allusions" and concludes with the remark that:

> In any case, the learned allusive language is not the spontaneous speech of the Negro people.[4]

Black critics have in recent times tended to lose sight of the fact that the uniqueness of their culture is to be found in its composite nature. W.E.B. DuBois expressed awareness of this dualism in a 1903 essay, "Of the Sorrow Songs" which was included in The Souls of Black Folk. In that essay, DuBois traces the origin of the spiritual to "primitive African music" which he sees as the main source. He does not, however, hesitate to say that black music developed as a composite, combining Negro and Caucasian elements:

> The first is African music, the second Afro-American, while the third is a blending of Negro music with the music heard in the foster land. The result is still distinctively Negro and the method of blending original, but the elements are both Negro and Caucasian.[5]

DuBois' insight is central to my argument: the originality of Afro-American music does not lie in its refusal to employ elements from the white culture, but rather in the way it "blends" those elements with African ones. It is an insight which will be progressively abandoned as Afro-Americans in talking about their culture adopted an ever-increasing nationalistic tone.

In moving towards a discussion of the black nationalist position, I will begin with Richard Wright's essay, "The Literature of the Negro in the United States" which is important in the way in which it sees political reality as the basis of the development of the notion of a black aesthetic. Wright argues that Pushkin and Dumas were, in spite of being black, thoroughly at home in the mainstream cultures in which they lived, whereas the black American's relationship to his country has been marked by *separation*, *insecurity*, and *violence* and that these factors lie at the source of a separatist black literary manner. Wright sees two kinds of black literary output: "a narcissistic level" which is middle class and seeks to be accepted by the white world, and the "forms of things unknown" which consist of folk utterances, spirituals, blues, work songs, and folklore. Wright adopts a Marxist perspective in that essay and looks forward to the day when the term "negro" will be meaningless as a social category just as it was for Pushkin and Dumas:

> If the expression of the American Negro should take a sharp turn toward strictly racial themes, then you will know by that token that we are suffering our old and ancient agonies at the hands of our white American neighbors. If, however, our expression broadens, assumes the common themes and burdens of literary expression which are the heritage of all men, then by that token you will know that a humane attitude prevails in America towards us. And a gain in humaneness in America is a gain in humaneness for us all. When that day comes, there will exist one more proof of the oneness of man, of the basic unity of human life on this earth.[6]

Nevertheless his division of black writing into a middle class stream and a folk stream is a major insight. It is unfortunate that he did not investigate the ways in which these two interact, but tended to

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see them only as more or less separate developments dependent upon the class or social background of the writer.

In an essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" Langston Hughes discusses a similar dichotomy in black culture. On the one hand is the "high class" negro:

> The father is perhaps a doctor, lawyer, landowner or politician. The mother may be a social worker or a teacher, or she may do nothing and have a maid .... In the North they go to white theaters and white movies.........
>
> But then there are the low-down folks, the so-called common element, and they are the majority — may the Lord be praised.[7]

In Hughes' view, the true black writing is one that is not ashamed (as high class writing tends to be) of the traditions created by the "common element" but makes use of it in the way that Hughes himself employed jazz rhythms in his poetry. The more important point, however, is that while both Wright and Hughes are correct in seeing the 'common element' as a vital source of good writing, neither of them believes that elements borrowed from the white culture can play an important role. Indeed borrowing from white culture is condemned as a decadent and narcissistic black middle-class practice.

The same dichotomy of folk culture versus the middle class noted by both Wright and Hughes is again reaffirmed in 1962 by Leroi Jones, who gives the idea a militant separatist flavor typical of the sixties. Baraka (Jones) argues that there is a separation between negro life and art which is a consequence of the fact that most writers, being middle-class, have tended to ape the whites. Black literature, therefore, has been mediocre and will improve only when it employs models which can articulate black experience, for the negro's strength lies in that no man's land outside of the mainstream.[8]

Two years before Jones delivered that address in 1962, at the American Society for African Culture, Julian Mayfield had struck the same separatist note in an article, "Into the Mainstream and Oblivion"[9] in which he had advocated that Afro-American writers should escape the narrow national orbit and soar into the space of more universal experience. Mayfield's own career when he left the U.S. and went to live in Accra as editor of African Forum exemplifies the kind of global (or Pan-African) perspective which he wants Afro-American writers to adopt. However, the idea of a literature with universal or more than national appeal which he introduces is later to become crucial in discussions of the black aesthetic and is a notion to which I will return later in this introduction.

Don Lee and Larry Neal are two more of the important theoreticians of black literature in the sixties. The decade was for blacks in America years of profound social and psychological changes. The Supreme Court decision of 1954 in the Brown vs. the Topeka Kansas Board of Education case had ruled that segregated education was unconstitutional. The decision had given rise to a wave of optimism among blacks who were encouraged by it to demand intergration in other areas. The late fifties were a period of boycotts and marches and saw the emergence of Martin Luther King as a national figure. The tardiness and resistance with which white America responded to these demands created tensions which not even the signing by President Johnson of the Civil Rights Act could dispel. There was a widespread sentiment especially among young Blacks that America was not sincere in its offers of integration and that the only salvation for black people lay in the self-consciousness of themselves as constituting a separate nation within the United States. Thus the predominant outlook in both the creative and theoretical writing among blacks was separatist and Lee and Neal are therefore typical.[10] Neal characterizes the Black Arts Writers thus:

> They are not speaking of an art that screams and masturbates before white audiences. That is the path of Negro literature and civil rights literature ...... Instead they are speaking of an art that addresses itself directly to Black people; an art that speaks to us in terms of our feelings and ideas about the world; an art that validates the positive aspects of our life. Dig: An art that opens us up to the beauty and ugliness within us: that makes us understand our condition and each other in a more profound manner; that unites us, exposing us to our painful weaknesses and strengths; and finally, an art that posits for us the vision of a Liberated Future.[11]

Don Lee very nearly repeats this artistic manifesto. According to him, the function of the new black literature is to destroy in the minds of black people the structures of thinking and self-delusion borrowed from white culture and to erect myths and symbols representative of the black experience.[12]

Further, the theoreticians also call for a literature that will lead to praxis, a literature that will incite to revolutionary action, and certainly some of the posturings of that literature were aimed at shocking the bourgeois — in this case the whites.[13] But

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even in this attitude it stands in an antithetical relationship to its own conception of the nature of mainstream (white) poetry. When Baraka wrote his poetic manifesto for this new poetry of praxis he chose a title, "Black Art," which immediately placed him in an antithetical relationship to Archibald MacLeish's more New Critical poem of a similar title, itself standing in an oppositional relationship to Horace's "Ars Poetica" with its admonition that poetry should delight and instruct.

It is intriguing that there should have been a white audience willing to suffer the invective of black writing in the sixties. Since their "unacceptable" judgements are, at least in part, responsible for the over-protective stance which blacks adopted toward their own literature, it is useful to attempt to understand something of what whites sought in Black Arts writing. The attitudes of paternalism and the desire for the exotic which whites are traditionally accused of bringing to black writing can hardly explain the situation of the sixties, for the literature offered very little that anyone could feel paternalistic about. To sit through a play by Leroi Jones was an entirely different experience from an evening spent in a Harlem night club in the 1920's.

A review by Philip Roth in The New York Review of Books of Leroi Jones' Dutchman is a useful starting point:

> ..... Jones finally lets the white audience off much too easily. They may leave the theater saying, as in their genial masochism they are more than willing to say, "Yes, yes, we are guilty," but of what and why they cannot have much knowledge. And refusing them such knowledge, Mr.

> Jones, for all his anger, will never force the well-intentioned liberal ideas to be converted into feelings of compassionate suffering.[14]

Roth mentions guilt as an important constituent in the complex of attitudes that would send a white person to see a play by Baraka. It is not a startling observation; Richard Wright had long before noticed this tendency among liberal whites to seek release from guilt in black writing, and had written Native Son partly to thwart this desire.[15] Jones, like Wright, is not concerned with arousing "compassionate suffering" in a white audience and Roth is wrong in faulting him for a failure to arouse such compassion. The masochism which Roth mentions so casually is perhaps more important than he allows; for it seems that the only emotional value for a white liberal of such a work would be to intensify his feelings of guilt. Possibly, the white audience perceives its willingness to assume this unrelieved burden of guilt as an expiation. Possibly, it seeks in this intensification of guilt a means to be compelled to participate in some social action.

Perhaps simply to try to understand why the New York Review of Books would offer space for the review of a play by Baraka is another way of approaching the problem. Does this not amount to a "domestication" of Baraka, a way of saying that he is not as outrageous, or different, as he supposes; indeed that he is in fact quite respectable by white liberal standards? Analogously, whites who read black literature of the sixties and went to see the plays eloquently denied to black writing any claim to exclusiveness. In a real sense, they were spies who were neutralizing an opponent by exposing his secrets. The point however need not be argued so aggressively. It is possible to view The New York Review of Books and others such as The New York Times Book Review, The Saturday Review and American Poetry Review and their readers as steadfast adherents to the notion that American culture is ultimately one, in spite of its apparent diversity.

The most systematic exponent of the literary features of the new black poetry, i.e. the most comprehensive exposition of the Black Aesthetic to date, is Stephen Henderson in his book, Understanding the New Black Poetry (1972), and subsequently in an article in Black World entitled "Saturation: Progress Report on a Theory of Black Poetry." He concedes both Western influences and plural interpretations, but he emphatically privileges black judgements:

> The question should be: Who is best qualified to judge Black poetry? Black people obviously should judge, since the poetry — at least the contemporary poetry — is directed to them.[16]

In discussing the poetry itself, he identifies its blackness under three headings: theme, structure, saturation.

> (1) By theme I mean that which is being spoken of, whether the specific subject matter, the emotional response to it, or its intellectual formulation.
>
> (2) By structure I mean chiefly some aspect of the poem such as diction, rhythm, figurative language which goes into the total make-up. (At times, I use the word in an extended sense to include what is usually called genre)
>
> (3) By saturation I mean several things, chiefly the communication of "Blackness" and fidelity to the observed or intuited truth of the Black experience in the United States. (p. 10)

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Henderson also rejects absolutely the idea that there are universal values which literature affirms or universal features which it exhibits.

> Is there a quality, condition, construction or composition that can be called "poetry" wherever it is found? Is there, in other words, a poem that everyone would agree to as being a poem, a "universal" poem? Some people obviously think so, and thus we find anthologies of the "best" in American poetry, or the best in world poetry, even in world literature. And certainly, there are numerous attempts to define poetry, often times with elaborate theoretical formulations.
>
> Accordingly, there are collections of poetry which contain some "universal" poems that were written by persons who incidentally happened to be black... For my part, I confess that the only "universal" commodity that I feel at all certain about is the hydrogen atom. (p. 8)

While sharing the scepticism expressed here of the existence of a universal poem, I believe that poems from different cultures sometimes participate in the same generic and other conventions. As a comparatist, I find that Henderson's position denies me access to poems which do not come out of my specific culture. Therefore, in addition to demonstrating various ways in which Western literature persists in modern black writing, I am also concerned with discovering some structures that give access to an outsider.

Meanwhile, a few words on the controversy which forms part of the background to Henderson's rejection of the idea of a universal poem, a poem which speaks to all humanity. In 1963, the poet Louis Simpson had made the following remarks in the New York Herald Tribune Book Week while reviewing Gwendolyn Brooks' Selected Poems:

> I am not sure it is possible for a Negro to write well without making us aware he is a Negro; on the other hand,

> if being Negro is the only subject, the writing is not important.

Henderson's response — and it is not his alone — is to argue that only blacks can decide what is important in their literature since nobody else can understand that literature anyway. Others have made the same argument. In an essay entitled "Towards a Black Aesthetic," Hoyt W. Fuller argues that the critic who is not Afro-American is usually so "arrogant, condescending, presumptuous and racist," his world being so removed from that of the black artist that the latter has no option but to establish his own evaluative criteria.[17]

This response, though logical in the context of the nationalistic impulse that gave rise to the theory of the Black Aesthetic, is hardly the only way of countering the position represented by Louis Simpson. The word "important" which Simpson uses in rejecting black writing is hardly a term of literary criticism. To reclaim his remark for criticism one has to expand it to mean blacks write about themselves in a way that fails to make their situation meaningful to nonblacks; in other words, they fail to give their subject matter a "universal" significance. Interpreted thus, Simpson's remark becomes more than a mere rejection of the subject of "blackness" as unimportant: after all if a poem on Julia's clothes or another on bantams in pinewoods can be good poems then obviously subject matter is only part of the story. Simpson's objection becomes what it should properly be — an objection based on an alleged technical failure on the part of black writers to handle their subject in such a way that its interest reaches even those who have not shared the experience on which it is based. Framed this way, Simpson's charge becomes much more serious and confronts squarely the black aestheticians' position that a reader needs to be black to understand their poetry.

Again, the black aesthetician can say, "So what?" It is up to Simpson to acquire an appreciation of the techniques that go into the making of black poetry and it is these very techniques that Henderson expounds so ably in his book. Such a response is superior to the one which merely says that a reader must be black and have lived in the ghetto to understand black poetry because it makes it clear that the criteria for appreciation are not merely sociological and racial which is what Henderson implies when he suggests that Ron Karenga, the black nationalist, may well be a better critic than Saunders Redding or Larry Neal — but rather belong to a tradition which any one may acquire, just as it was possible for the black Claude McKay to learn not only to read sonnets, but to write them. Ishmael Reed sums it up when he says in an interview:

> I just don't think that in the critical vocabulary of art, there exists the word, black. Traditions exist, yes.[18]

Value does not reside automatically in merely being traditional. Owing to the tendency of the black aestheticians to place value on every instance in which a work borrows from black folk traditions, they are unable to offer any theoretical guidance on what is good borrowing and what is not. Henderson exemplifies this difficulty. Admittedly, he cites two examples, one from Keorapetse Kgositsile and another from Baraka where black poets have failed to successfully

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employ elements from black culture, but his discussion is cursory and in the case of Kgositsile rather contrived. These are the poet's lines:

deep in your cheeks
your specific laughter owns
all things south of the ghosts
we once were. Straight ahead
the memory beckons from the future
You and I a tribe of colors

this song that dances
godlike rhythms to birth
footsteps of memory
the very soul aspires to. Songs
of origins songs of constant beginnings
What is this thing called
love (p. 308)

And here is Henderson's comment:

> Here the poet's usually precise rendering of experience degenerates, in the last line, into bathos. "What is this thing called/love." The referent here is probably not the pop song but a jazz version.[19]

Surely, this is a too convenient simplification of a rather complex situation. The song referred to is originally by Cole Porter. There may be jazz versions of it to which Kgositsile may be referring but there is no way of ascertaining that without resorting to the critically irrelevant recourse of asking the poet. There might be for Henderson the related question of how much Porter's music owes to black music, but it is the complexities of a serious concern with referential structures that Henderson seeks to avoid.

So far, Henderson's real reason for objecting to Kgositsile's line has not been made clear. The reason is not that the song is originally by a non-black composer, but rather that the poet in using the line fails to do anything interesting with it, he "verbalizes it in a manner indistinct from the original pop." I agree absolutely with Henderson's criticism of the line, even though I think he is not explicit enough. Why is it wrong to imitate pop but ostensibly not wrong to imitate jazz? The line is trite in this context not because it comes from pop — after all, T.S. Eliot can use "London Bridge is falling down" in a poem and thereby invests that line with a terror it did not possess before — but because the poet simply repeats it: there is no distance between him and the sentiments expressed in that tired old song. A New Critic would say there is no irony at play between Kgositsile and Porter. This is one way in which Henderson might have made his criticism more explicit, by admitting irony as one of the structural devices which make for good borrowing.

To say this, of course, is to open up black poetry to all those academic critics who must be excluded at all cost; thus Henderson is unable to specify precisely why Kgositsile fails here, precisely why the line "degenerates ... into bathos." Presumably, a reader who is in tune with the black experience will feel it instinctively, hence the claim that Ron Karenga is automatically a better critic than Saunders Redding. I find this argument unsatisfactory, for it begs some very important questions. What transformations does a writer inflict on the tradition (black or white) that he is borrowing from? For if it were enough simply to record, simply to express "fidelity to the observed and intuited truth of the black experience" then a tape recorder might be better than a poem. Theorists of the Black Aesthetics have performed an admirable task in emphasizing the importance of black traditions which have become, increasingly, an important source for black writers. But beyond pointing to sources in that black tradition, they have been unwilling to tackle the more difficult problem of evaluation — for the simple reason that evaluative criteria tend to lead to notions similar to those used in discussing the so-called mainstream writing. But the black tradition, even if the most important, is only one source for black writers: recognition of the contribution made by the non-black tradition may therefore be the first step towards formulating adequate critical standards, the first step away from critical self-indulgence.

The African position is much more diversified, lacking the kind of focus which Henderson has given to the Afro-American claims of a Black Aesthetic: however, the African voice has in recent times received strident amplification in Ayi Kwei Armah's article, "Beyond Larsony" in which he denounces outright any claim that African writing owes anything to Western writing:

> What, confronted with the dilemma of having to interpret African creativity .... to an audience nurtured in the belief that intelligence itself is alien to Africa, what can the conscientious and skilful Western critic of African literature do? He can deny the Africanness or the creativity of it — or both. If it proves impossible to deny creativity, a Western source must be found for it ....[20]

Although Armah's article is interesting as a polemic, it is not very explicit in setting out the nature of the African aesthetic; for that we have to look elsewhere. African theorists of the black aesthetic usually adopt one of several positions — or combinations thereof. The least sophisticated are those who maintain that since African literature is about African society, it is accessible only to people who know the society, i.e. Africans themselves. Thus the Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo:

> I do not see any validity in having someone who does not belong to the society from which the literature itself springs telling you how to write. What I mean is, if the writing is from a certain background, it's only people from that background who can tell the world, "This is good."[21]

Kofi Awoonor, another Ghanaian, makes the remark at the end of a discussion of his own novel, This Earth, My Brother, that any reader who does not see the character Amamu within the context of Ewe mythology or ontology "had better leave the work alone."[22]

Coming from writers these statements are surprising even if, fortunately, pointless. It was yet another Ghanaian, the late Joe deGraft who made an impact on the 1965 Commonwealth Arts Festival in London with an adaptation of Shakespeare's Hamlet, which after all was written originally for English audiences some four hundred years ago. What if Shakespeare had said that anybody who did not live in the sixteenth century European court had better leave the work alone?

Kofi Awoonor knows better than he would have us think from the above remark for he once gave this reply when asked whom he thought his basic audience was:

> I generally regard my audience as that sensitive and aware community of readers who are always the consumers of literature and I see them both in the African context and in the non-African context. I do not specifically believe that I am writing for any audience which is limited either

> by geography or by perception. Those who will read Norman Mailer, I hope will read me.[23]

Quite apart from seeking to exclude non-Africans in much the same way as the Afro-American theorists had sought to exclude non-blacks, i.e., quite apart from its chauvinism, this position is faulty in the way it implies a clear division between form and content and privileges the latter at the expense of the former. It is of no interest to such critics that even though Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautyful Ones and Chinua Achebe's A Man of the People share a common theme — namely corruption in contemporary Africa, they are nevertheless two different kinds of novel. This difference can be demonstrated in a number of ways. For example, Achebe's novel unfolds as the increasing loss of idealism (or innocence) by its central character, Odili. This development then becomes a constitutive convention which helps the reader understand the novel through implicit comparison with others of that special kind of genre such as Flaubert's L'Education Sentimentale. Armah's novel which uses excremental imagery as a central metaphor can thus be placed in an entirely different genre which would include works by Rabelais and Swift. By ignoring all except the purely thematic content, these critics render themselves unable to distinguish between two very dissimilar novels. Indeed some of the thematic emphasis may be missed by ignoring formal features; for simply by being placed in the appropriate genre Achebe's novel reveals itself as emphasizing the intensification of cynicism, while Armah's underlines the need for regeneration.

Some African critics, however, have been more sophisticated in their effort to define an African aesthetic and have sought to establish correlations between an African world view and the formal features of African writing. Leopold Senghor is one of the pioneers of this approach.

> It has often been said that the Negro is a man of nature. He lives traditionally off the land and with the land, in accordance with the cosmos. He is a sensualist, a being whose senses are exposed. He is without intermediary between subject and object; these are for him simultaneous. He is first of all sounds, odors, rhythms, forms and colours; I mean that he is touch before he is sight, unlike the white European. He feels more than he sees; he feels himself. It is within himself, within his flesh, that he receives and senses the radiations that any existing object emits. Aroused, he responds to the appeal and lets himself go, moving from subject to object, from me to thou, on the waves of the other. He dies within himself to be reborn in the other. He is not assimilated; he assimilates and identifies himself with the other, which is the best way to know him.[24]

There is a strong echo here of Keats' notion of "the negative capability," and even more emphatically of Heidegger's notion that to experience the essential nature of a "thing" is to participate in the way in which it brings together into a onefold the fourfold elements of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals. In Heidegger's view, each thing reveals its nature in the way in which it relates humans to the gods, the heavens to the earth, and this knowledge of things he contrasts with scientific knowledge which only takes a partial, earthbound view of the thing it already intends to control. True knowledge would not lead to control, or to the atom bomb, but to a deepening understanding of our place in the universe.[25] Both Heidegger and Senghor are equally easy to refute: neither the word

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"thing" or any other word for that matter, nor mankind's place in the world are permanently definable in terms of notions that are centuries, or at least decades out of date. One could say, referring specifically to Senghor, that an account of the negro which supposedly is permanently applicable is suspect especially when it comes at a time when Africa has had centuries of commerce of every nature with Europe. Admittedly, Senghor himself knew this when he declared at the first International Conference of Black Writers and Artists in 1956 in Paris that all black people were "cultural half-castes." Indeed a good deal of what Senghor had to say there is interestingly contrary to his usual position:

> I think all the great civilizations were civilizations that resulted from an interbreeding....... In my opinion, and objectively, this interbreeding is necessary. It is a result of the contact between civilizations. Indeed, either the external situation has changed and cultural borrowing enables us to adapt ourselves to the new situation, or the external situation has not changed, and cultural borrowing enables us to make a better adaptation to the situation.[26]

Yet even though he seems here to turn his back on those who would remorselessly pursue a separate black aesthetic, Senghor himself in his criticism tended to emphasize the so-called African style since, in his opinion, that style had not received its due recognition. But in so doing he failed completely to describe this African style in terms of its relationship to European borrowing, whose presence and importance he acknowledges in the notion of the cultural mulatto.

And what, according to Senghor, are the constituents of this Negro-African style? Where the Afro-American had stressed subject matter itself as an important constituent, Senghor's emphasis is on imagery and rhythm as the two elements which express the peculiarly African viewpoint on the subject matter.

> The European derives pleasure from recognizing the world in the reproduction of an object designated by the term "subject", while the African Negro's pleasure resides in knowing the world intensely through imagery and rhythm. In the European, the thread of the senses leads to the heart and to the head; in the Negro African it leads to the heart and to the stomach, to the very root of life.[27]

According to Senghor, African-Negro imagery is not imagery equation, but imagery-analogy, surrealist imagery which suggests rather than defines, and the more the image is unreal or surreal the more it expresses. He meets the objection that a good deal of Paul Eluard, for instance, functions in the supposedly African manner by saying that where European surrealism reveals no preternatural forces at work in the universe, African surrealism makes manifest these forces. Not surprisingly, most of his examples are drawn from traditional sculpture: the task of tracing how this traditional surrealism survives in a modern poem is yet to be performed.

Next Senghor's discussion of rhythm is even less satisfactory. Rhythm unites sign and meaning, he says, but there is nothing peculiarly Negro-African in that. He contends that African languages tend to use an "intuitive syntax of coordination" where Indo-European languages employ a logical subordinating syntax,[28] but this statement is historically inaccurate. Parataxis was a more prevalent feature of English in the period of King James than it is now and it is conceivable that African languages will move towards increased subordination and therefore, new rhythmic configurations. There is the related point that spoken language is usually more paratactic than written. Only in the idea that the African poem is normally accompanied by a musical instrument does Senghor point to a feature which has been long lost to the Western world, but as this is a feature whose successful adaptation to modern usage cannot be recorded on the written page, I shall not discuss it further.

Wole Soyinka, the great antagonist of Negritude, is another major theoretician of the African aesthetic. Soyinka's criticism of negritude had been that in clinging to an idealized and static conception of Africa, the negritude writers were failing to clearly present the tensions which existed in precolonial Africa and which were likely to come to the fore again in the post-independence period. And by not being clearsighted the writers of Africa were failing in the important duty of warning their societies against danger.[29] It is surprising, therefore, to find how close Soyinka comes to freezing Africa in his own discussion of the black aesthetic. First he offers this view of occidental aesthetics:

> You must picture a steam-engine which shunts itself between rather closely-spaced suburban stations. At the first station it picks up a ballast of allegory, puffs into the next emitting a smokescreen on the eternal landscape of nature truths. At the next it loads up with a different species of logs which we shall call naturalist tinder, puffs into a half-way stop where it fills up with the synthetic fuel of surrealism, from which point yet another holistic world view is glimpsed and asserted through psychedelic smoke. A new consignment of absurdist coke lures it into the next station from which it departs giving off no smoke at all, and no fire until it derails briefly along constructivist tracks and is towed back to the starting point by a neo-classic engine.[30]

While Western art is directed by "period dialectics," African arts on the other hand attest to a "cohesive understanding of irreducible truths." (p. 38) Yet when Soyinka articulates these truths they turn out to be surprising only in their close resemblance to ideas from a certain period in Western culture as well as to some of Senghor's premises for Negritude. According to Soyinka, where society lives in close interrelation with nature, the rhythms of social activity are regulated by the processes of nature such as ebb and tide, or rain and drought; and the highest moral order is that which ensures a continuing correspondence between nature and human society. "A breakdown in moral order implies, in the African world-view, a rupture in the body of Nature just like the physical malfunctioning of one man." (p. 52) This view is strikingly similar to the kinds of microcosm — body politic — macrocosm interrelations which E.M.W. Tillyard has demonstrated to be the basis of many of Shakespeare's plays — where the childish and irresponsible conduct of a King Lear (or Gloucester) will lead to upheavals in the political life of the state (or the family) and will be paralleled by a turbulence in nature such as the storm on the heath.[31] Soyinka argues further that the African world view is not stagnant but is continually absorbing new ideas and experiences — while maintaining the same interrelations between humans, society and nature. He cites, for example, the extension of the realm of Sango, the Yoruba god of lightning, to include electricity, (p. 54) but I find the argument too contrived. Soyinka ignores the fact that the extension of

Sango's domain to include electricity implies emptying the myth of Sango of some of its seriousness, that at this later cultural stage the myth survives as a displacement of itself. A major difficulty with Soyinka's position is his failure to take account of the fact that even though modern African writing contains a social vision that parallels a presumably traditional one, the levels of concern or seriousness are not the same.

However, whereas Soyinka sees African literature, especially drama, as a reaffirmation of these interrelations between man, society and nature, he does not discuss the formal features of that literature and is probably more tolerant of borrowing than the Afro-American theoreticians. For instance, one of the plays that he cites as illustrating the African world-view is J.P. Clark's _Song of a Goat_ whose title alone suggests its affinities with Greek tragedy.[32] Elsewhere, his simple response to the question why an African (Camara Laye) should in the _Radiance of the King_ write like Kafka is, "Why not?" (p. 125) In his view, literature is African primarily insofar as it links up with and participates in a traditionally defined African world view. African literature explains present chaos in terms of the violated values of the past. This approach is invaluable in articulating the collective social vision discernible in modern African writing, but does not help in an attempt to understand its formal character.

Another Nigerian critic, Donatus Nwoga, has attempted the more difficult task of defining African poetry by deriving its formal characteristics from the world view it expresses.[33] And even though he falls inevitably foul of the fallacy of supposing that there is a permanent African world view, yet Nwoga is more willing, than most African writers and critics, to admit the interrelationship between African writing and other literatures.[34] In his view, African writers can borrow from wherever they want provided they express ultimately what is uniquely an African viewpoint. His description of how the borrowed elements function within this specifically African viewpoint is, however, far from satisfactory. In his view, African poetry aims at expressing a uniquely African pre-rational awareness of the world. The fact, however, is that a good deal of poetry including Western poetry tries to capture what can be called a pre-rational awareness — this is especially true of Western poetry since the Romantics. Not surprisingly, therefore, the features he isolates as characterizing African poetry will be found in poetry from other parts of the world — features such as the fusing together of the past, present and future, or the cross-breeding of visionary and aesthetic symbols — i.e. the idea that a poem suggests more than it says.

The attempt to define an exclusively black aesthetic is clearly threatened by many pitfalls. For a comparatist, an obvious shortcoming is the blindness to parallel developments in other national literatures, and the issues thus raised. Then there is the lack of a historical perspective which leads some theoreticians to define black or African writing in terms of some eternal verities which the literature expresses. Thirdly there is the failure to distinguish between the successful and unsuccessful borrowing form the black or African tradition, i.e. the tendency to sanction any continuation of what is considered black or African. This is from the critical point of view the most serious danger since the willingness to discuss what constitutes successful borrowing from the black or African tradition would dispose the aesthetician to allowing an equally successful adaptation of non-black materials. Because of this, African critics, for instance, have not paid sufficient attention to the ways in which their writers — except such spectacular cases as Laye and Ouologuem — have borrowed creatively from non-African writers, pretending either that the practice does not exist, or that it is to be condemned out of hand. Any account of black writing must concede borrowings from non-black sources, but of course, once this is conceded the whole notion of a uniquely black literature becomes problematic.

The next chapter will discuss a number of ways in which modern African and other black poetry relates to Western poetry. The issue of originality will be of special concern in the discussion and T.S. Eliot's seminal essay, "Tradition and the individual Talent," will provide some of the initial theoretical framework. In the three subsequent chapters, I discuss three black poets, a West Indian, an African and an Afro-American, in an attempt to show in three very different ways the permanent presence of Western literature in modern black poetry.

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I have chosen Derek Walcott as the West Indian writer to discuss here because he illustrates perfectly the Caribbean problem of how to write a national literature in an absence of native literary traditions. The Senegalese poet, Leopold Senghor, on whom a good deal has been written is once again invoked in these pages because he exemplifies convincingly the dualism which is an inescapable feature of modern African writing — a feature of his work which his commentators have not sufficiently recognized. The Afro-American poet Eugene Redmond shows another kind of dualism, but a further reason for discussing him here is the hope of stimulating further work on his exciting poetry.

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NOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION

[1] R.J. Owens, "West Indian Poetry," Caribbean Quarterly, VIII, Dec. 1961, p. 121.

[2] Thomas McFarland, "The Originality Paradox," New Literary History, Vol. 11, 3, Spring 1974, pp. 454-455.

[3] Addison Gayle, Jr., "The Function of Black Literature at the Present Time" in The Black Aesthetic, ed., Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York: Anchor Books, 1971), p. 393.

[4] Dudley Randall, "The Black Aesthetic in the Thirties, Forties and Fifties" in The Black Aesthetic, p. 218.

[5] W.E.B. DuBois, "Of the Sorrow Songs," The Souls of Black Folk (1903 rpt. New York: Signet, 1969), p. 270.

[6] Richard Wright, "Negro Literature in the United States" in Black Expression, ed., Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1969), p. 255.

[7] Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Nation, CXXII, 1926, p. 692.

[8] Leroi Jones, "The Myth of a Negro Literature" in Black Expression, p. 191.

[9] Julian Mayfield, "Into the Mainstream and Oblivion," The American Negro Writer and His Roots (American Society of African Culture, 1960), p. 29.

[10] Others' attitudes were also expressed. James Baldwin's novel, Another Country (1962) is directed to both blacks and whites. Further, critic Saunders Redding and poet Robert Hayden were emphatic in their rejection of a separate black aesthetic in a questionnaire to black writers compiled by Hoyt W. Fuller, another theoretician of the Black Aesthetic. See Negro Digest, January, 1969.

[11] Larry Neal, "Any Day Now," Ebony, August, 1969, p. 55.

[12] Don Lee, "Introduction" New Dynamite Voices, #1 (Detroit, Broadside Press, 1971).

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[13] Ron Karenga's essay, "Black Cultural Nationalism" in The Black Aesthetic (p. 32) exemplifies this demand for a literature of praxis:

> That is why we say that all Black art, irregardless of any technical requirements, must have three basic characteristics which make it revolutionary. In brief it must be functional, collective and committing........ In terms of painting, we do not need pictures of oranges in a bowl or trees standing innocently in the midst of a wasteland. If we must paint oranges and trees, let our guerrillas be eating those oranges for strength and using those trees for cover.

[14] Quoted in Michael Popkin, ed., Modern Black Writers (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1978), p. 70.

[15] Richard Wright, "How Bigger was Born," Native Son (New York: Harper & Row, 1940), p. xxvii.

[16] Stephen Henderson, Understanding the New Black Poetry (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1972), p. 10.

[17] Hoyt Fuller, "Towards a Black Aesthetic" in Black Expression, p. 240.

[18] Ishmael Reed, "Interview," American Poetry Review, Jan/Feb., 1978, Vol. 7, no. 1.

[19] Stephen Henderson, "Saturation: Progress Report on a Theory of Black Poetry," Black World, June, 1975, p. 13.

[20] Ayi Kwei Armah, "Larsony," First World, April/May 1977, p. 50.

[21] Ama Ata Aidoo, "Interview with Maxine McGregor" in African Writers Talking, ed., Dennis Duerden and Cosmo Pieterse (London: Heineman, 1972), p. 25.

[22] Kofi Awoonor, "Tradition and Continuity in African Literature" in Exile and Tradition, ed., Roland Smith (New York: Africana Publishing Co., 1976), p. 172.

[23] Kofi Awoonor, "Interview" in Palaver, ed., Bernth Lindfors, Ian Munro, Richard Priebe and Richard Sanden (Austin: African and Afro-American Research Institute, University of Texas, 1972), p. 45.

[24] L.S. Senghor, "L'Esthetique negro-Africaine", Liberte 1: Negritude et Humanisme (1964). Reprinted in translation in The Ideology of Blackness, ed., Raymond F. Betts (Lexington: D.C. Heath & Co., 1971), p. 116.

Aime Cesaire expresses a similar view of the Negro in these

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famous lines from his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1971), p. 117:

> Eia pour le Kailcédrat royal!
> Eia pour ceux qui n'ont jamais rien inventé
> pour ceux qui n'ont jamais rien exploré
> pour ceux qui n'ont jamais rien dompté
>
> mais ils s'abandonnent saisis, a l'éssence de toute chose
> ignorants des surfaces mais saisis par le mouvement
> de toute chose
> insoucieux de dompter, mais jouant le jeu du monde
> véritablement les fils ainés du monde
> poreux à tous les souffles du monde.

[25] Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Albert Hofstadter, ed. (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1974), pp. 165-186.

[26] John Reed and Clive Wake, eds., Senghor: *Prose and Poetry* (London: Heinemann, 1965), p. 75.

[27] Betts, ed., p. 117.

[28] Betts, ed., p. 118.

[29] Wole Soyinka, "The Writer in a Modern African State" in *The Writer in Modern Africa*, ed., Per Wastberg (New York: Africana, 1969), p. 17.

[30] Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 37.

[31] See E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1945).

[32] Apart from the title "Song of a Goat" which is a now discredited translation of the Greek word from which the English "tragedy" is derived, Clark's play also observes the unities.

[33] D. Ibe Nwoga, "The Limitations of Universal Critical Criteria," Roland Smith, ed., p. 9.

[34] Nwoga's "Plagiarism and Authentic Creativity in West Africa", *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 6, 1, Spring 1975, takes the "unAfrican" position that originality in African writing has not much to do with where the artist derived his material. Such a position is more likely to come from a non-African like Bernth Lindfors who indeed makes a similar remark in his *Folklore in Nigerian Literature* (New York: Africana Publishing Co., 1975), p. 31. Nevertheless,

another African, Uganda's Taban lo Liyong, has in his critical writings been advocating a "cultural synthesism." This point of view is, however, not very popular among Africans.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE SCOPE OF INFLUENCE

Why does an African poet imitate a European one? We can respond to that question with a series of increasingly sophisticated answers. We can assert emphatically from the outset that literary creation is usually founded on models, pre-existing literary works which provide the new writer with a tradition to build upon or kick against.[1]

For the African writer who has gone through a western type of education and who is writing in French, English or Portuguese, the European models are as available as the traditional models, if not more so. His success as a writer is not whether he borrows from the African tradition or the European one, but as Bernth Lindfors remarks, "in how he uses what he borrows."[2] And quite clearly African as well as Afro-American and Carribean writing is full of borrowings from European models. Claude McKay's sonnets provide a ready instance of a twentieth century black poet using successfully a form that has its origins in Pre-Renaissance Europe. Much has been made of the fact that during World War II Sir Winston Churchill read McKay's "If We Must Die" — originally written in response to the lynching of blacks in the United States — to exhort the forces of "democracy" in the fight against fascism. Henderson's comment on this point is as usual pertinent:

> The crowning irony, of course, is that few people knew that McKay was black or bothered to think, if they knew it, that his homeland Jamaica was an exploited British Colony with a history of bloody suppression.[3]

Unlike Henderson, I am interested in a central way in the features that enabled Churchill to appropriate this poem: I value as a comparatist the capacity of a literary work to have meaning beyond its immediate time and place. That McKay's poem has relevance for situations other than that intended by the poet does not deny its relevance to the original situation; above all, Churchill is not misinterpreting McKay, he is recuperating the poem in a manner relevant to his time. McKay's poem offers itself most generously to such recuperation for a number of reasons. First is the sonnet form which turns the discourse into a language game whose rules are available to anyone familiar with sonnets. Second, McKay's poem does not employ a single instance of an idiom which is restrictedly black, and which would impede a Winston Churchill from claiming it. The third reason is closely related to the second: the poem's central image of a small, outnumbered heroic band fighting to the end against a barbaric horde — an image which has no explicit racial content — is of general appeal. It is present for instance in La Chanson de Roland, the French medieval epic. This image combines with the poem's invective diction ("mad dogs," "monsters," "murderous cowardly pack") and open snarling vowel sounds into a statement of angry defiance in which the anger and defiance are located in the poem, not in the external circumstances which occasioned it.

Another instance of a black poet successfully adopting a

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non-African poetic form is J.P. Clark's famous poem, "Ibadan"[4]:

> Ibadan,
>   running splash of rust
> and gold — and scattered
> among seven hills like broken
> china in the sun.[5]

Although our main concern here is with the form of Clark's poem, the phrase "seven hills" used in connection with a city contains an interesting resonance to another city renowned for its seven hills, namely Rome, and to the ritual significance of the number seven. Here obviously the form is taken from the imagist tradition of looking for one image that will sum up the poet's feeling about his subject. Though Clark's image is visual and triumphantly so, it belongs to the same tradition as Ezra Pound's

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
> Petals on a wet, black bough.[6]

Unlike Clark's visual image, Pound's poem seeks more to give voice to an inner feeling, it expresses an emotional response to the crowd. Ultimately, as Pound makes clear in Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir, both he and Clark have learned from the Japanese form, the haiku.

Another general way in which black writing relates to European literature is found in the wealth of casual quotes and references to the Western tradition. This practice of which there is a great variety of examples seems to me evidence of the "mixed mind" which black writers possess, of the fact that they share in the Western intellectual culture.[7]

An interesting variation in this generalized kind of relationship is when the European work is deliberately recalled in more than one casual reference to provide an underlying argument for the African work. Wole Soyinka's poem "Gulliver" can be read as a comment on the childish pomposity that is at the root of much civil strife; indeed, he himself could be Gulliver trapped in the Lilliput of Nigeria in civil war:

> From Us the Lillywhite King Lillypuss
> To you obfuscating Blefuscoons
> From Us the Herrenyolk of Egg
> To you Albinos of the Albumen.... We declare ....![8]

Swift's novel provides Soyinka with a set of ready-made satirical images and ideas. "Lillypuss" recalls Lilliput and suggests therefore exaggerated self-importance which fails to see actual smallness. "Blefuscoons" recalls Swift's Blefuscu with Soyinka's own echo of "buffoons." The people of Blefuscu were enemies of the Lilliputians whom they nevertheless resembled in their smallness. "Herrenyolk" which suggests Hitler's irrational theory of the Herrenvolk also recalls the debate in Swift between the Big Endians and the Little Endians over which end of an egg should be cut open, and is thus another image of pointless civil strife. This hilarious portrayal of the Nigerian situation could not have been written in this way, nor can it be thus understood, without a previous acquaintance with Swift's Gulliver's Travels.

These are general kinds of debt in which a phrase, an idea or an image merely is borrowed from the open storehouse of European writing. In other cases an entire poem may be patterned after a specific model. This kind of interplay occurs at two levels of sophistication.

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In the simpler instances, the African poet tries to "Africanize" his model by a simple process of substitution, replacing the images of the original with African ones. Soyinka, with his gift for the biting phrase, refers to this as the "Gather - ye- hibiscus - while ye may" phase.[9] In "A Taxi Driver on His Death" a Ugandan, Timothy Wangusa, derives his theme and structure in this way from Yeats' "An Irish Airman Foresees his Death."[10] Yeats' original, certainly not one of his best poems, depends for its effect on an insistent rhythm. The rhyming octosyllabic lines generate a regular rhythm and thus contribute to the meaning of this poem which among other possibilities of meaning extols adventure and bravado. Wangusa's poem lacks Yeats' formal discipline: his lines are irregular and do not rhyme; he does however, try to match Yeats' argument. Thus while Yeat's pilot is sure he will perish one day in the sky flying his craft, Wangusa's driver knows he will die on the road while driving. Where Yeats' pilot confesses that he neither loves the people he defends nor hates those he fights, Wangusa's driver claims to be endangering his own life, not because he cares for any man's journey, nor for the proprietor's gain. The Ugandan does, however, fail to provide a parallel of the pilot's real reason for participating in a war he cares nothing about politically: the pilot's excitement, the feeling of being alive which can only be obtained from gambling with death. This reading is explicit in Yeats' final lines:

> I balanced all, brought all to mind,
> The years to come seemed waste of breath,
> A waste of breath the years behind
> In balance with this life, this death.

Wangusa's poem on the other hand offers no coherent explanation for the risk its speaker takes with his life, not even implicitly: on the one hand, he seems to attribute his inevitable death on the road to the fickleness and cruelty of machines; on the other hand, he seems to spur his machine to go faster. Thus, in the final analysis, this poem reads like an empty imitation performed by a writer with nothing much to say.

This practice is not confined to lesser poets like Wangusa, the more famous poet, Christopher Okigbo, began his career in this imitative manner before moving to a different style. Okigbo's lines

> We are the dumb bells
> We are the dumb bells
> Outside the gates
> In hollow landscape[11]

clearly imitate T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men":

> We are the hollow men
> We are the stuffed men
> Leaning together
> Headpiece filled with straw.

Nor is there anything in the rest of Okigbo's poem which would encourage a reading of those lines as a parody of Eliot. There is no evidence within the poem that the poet is aware how bad those lines are; he did, however, delete them in a later edition of his poems.

In a different kind of imitation, some African poets do not simply substitute "African" imagery while retaining most of the form and the theme of his model poem, but their imitation serves as a commentary on the model poem. In this kind of imitation there is often some ironic interplay between the two poems. Parody, the imitation of the style of a particular work and the incongruous application of that style to a lowly, discordant subject, is one version of this more active kind of copying. However, African writers have tended not to favor mere parody. For many of them the notion of poetry as a linguistic game to be enjoyed in itself — which is an underlying motivation of parody - is not a very worthwhile one. More often, the model poem provides a statement which the African writer sees as inapplicable to his situation; he thus recalls the earlier poem in order to disagree with it.

David Rubadiri's "Stanley Meets Mutesa,"[12] for example, is modelled on Eliot's "Journey of the Magi." The East African poem is about the coming of the white man to Africa and the meeting of African tradition with Western culture. Rubadiri's poem comments upon Eliot's more or less explicitly, and what may seem like slavish imitation or parody develops into an ironic reply and a demystification of Eliot's Christian spirituality. The first six lines read like a re-writing of Eliot's in the familiar hibiscus-for-rosebuds manner:

> Such a time of it they had;
> The heat of the day
> The chill of the night
> And the mosquitoes that followed.
> Such was the time and
> They bound for a kingdom.

But already one begins to feel a tension between this and Eliot's opening lines which, taken from a sermon by Lancelot Andrewes, have a solemnity lacking in Rubadiri. In Eliot's opening lines three details illustrate why the magi's journey was a difficult one: the ways were "deep," the weather "sharp," it was "the very dead of winter." Eliot's metaphorical terms ("deep," "sharp," "dead") contrast with the literal terms chosen by Rubadiri — "heat," "chill" and especially "mosquitoes." This introduces Rubadiri's contrast of the intensely physical nature of the African experience with what he considers the vague spiritualism of Eliot. The East African is not simply parodying by forcing a more literal reading of Eliot's solemn lines: the apparent parody is only the first step towards a reversal of Eliot's position.

Rubadiri's poem in two more stanzas lists the hardships endured by the travellers; there is an interesting shift in emphasis. Eliot presented the experience from the point of view of the Oriental King who sees with condescension the petty, physical needs of the lowly people he is forced to travel with:

> Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
> And running away, and wanting their liquor and women.[13]

The African poet, on the other hand, dwells more at length on the situation of the porters, the "natives" who carry Stanley's person and equipment on a painful journey whose purpose they do not understand. His more detailed description of their hardship accentuates the physical tone of the poem. Also, the rhythm contributes: where Eliot's lines are slow and ruminative, employing long verses, coordinate clauses, parenthesis, unusual and emphatic word arrangement, Rubadiri's verses are shorter, more predictably rhythmical, and thus reinforce the feeling of physical effort:

Each day a weary pony dropped
Left for the vultures on the plains;
Each afternoon a human skeleton collapsed,
Left for the Masai on the plains.

And what is Rubadiri's view of Stanley's journey? And why is Eliot here? Stanley, of course, represents the West — this is explicitly stated in the last line of the poem, "And the West is let in." Stanley's unfeeling manner towards his African carriers epitomizes the poet's view of the Western take-over of Africa. Christianity was and is an important element in that take-over and this is where Eliot is relevant. Rubadiri undercuts the spirituality which Eliot takes to be the essential character of Christianity's influence. Rubadiri sees the coming of Christianity in more forceful terms; African souls were not gradually, imperceptibly overcome by this new faith as seems to have happened with the magus. Christianity came in the turbulent wake of robust adventurers like H.M. Stanley. It is therefore not adequate in my view to see Rubadiri's poem merely as a parody of Eliot's.[14]

Parody, to quote Jonathan Culler, involves the opposition of two modes of "vraisemblance," but its oppositions do not lead to a synthesis at a higher level.[15] Certainly there is parody in Rubadiri's poem, but it is part of a more serious subversion of Eliot's statement. We might say that Rubadiri's poem parodies and also offers an ironic reading of Eliot's: his context makes Eliot's spiritualism an antiquated irrelevancy. He is not merely emptying Eliot's forms of their substance by parody; he is also attacking with irony the substance itself. Rubadiri's success was possible because, unlike Wangusa, he had definite feelings about his subject matter which were not dictated to him by Eliot's poem. "Journey of the Magi" provided at once an aid to structuring his feelings and a polemical point of departure. A similar but more extreme instance of this polemical intertexuality is Baraka's "Black Art" in its relationship to Archibald MacLeish's "Ars Poetica." Unlike instances of imitation by substitution, Baraka here shows that he can deviate technically from his model when it suits his purpose, that he can even be irreverent towards the model. Above all, he seems to have thoroughly internalized the argument of his model, and offers his own poem as a refutation or a displacement of MacLeish's. To rephrase the point in Eliot's terms: while Yeats' "An Irish Airman Foresees his Death" is not altered by Wangusa's version, "Journey of the Magi" is indeed altered by "Stanley Meets Mutesa." Both stand as antithetical statements on the first impact of Christianity.

So far, we have been discussing instances in which the African poet gives obvious evidence of his indebtedness to other traditions. All these instances I shall designate as cases of imitation which I distinguish radically from influence. In influence proper, the implied disavowal of models and insistence on originality nevertheless betrays contact with a model or models. In imitation, "the author gives up, to the degree that he can, his creative personality to that of another author, and usually of a particular work, while at the same time being freed from the detailed fidelity expected in translation."[16] Influence is very difficult to prove conclusively and Ihab Hassan has cautioned against confusing mere affinity with genuine influence:

> When we say that A has influenced B, we mean that after literary or aesthetic analysis we can discern a number of significant similarities between the works of A and B......
> ..... So far we have established no influence; we have only documented what I call affinity. For influence presupposes some manner of causality.[17]

Hassan's view differs significantly in its strictness and in its insistence on causality from the position of Harold Bloom who in The Anxiety of Influence argues that a poet will misread or attempt to escape the domination of poets whom he may or may not have read. Bloom's theory, in bypassing causality, liberates the critic who only needs his persuasive skill now to affirm his own awareness of influence between any two writers. To quote Bloom:

> A poem is a poet's melancholy at his lack of priority. The failure to have begotten oneself is not the cause of the poem, for poems arise out of the illusion of freedom, out of a sense of priority being possible......Criticism is the art of knowing the hidden roads that go from poem to poem.[18]

I share some of Bloom's assumptions, and agree for instance that no poet is prior in the sense of being in the position to write without being indebted to prior writers; and I agree that influence is often more diffuse than a notion of strict causality would permit it to be. I am not, however, sure that Bloom's notion of anxiety is useful in what I seek to do with black and Western writers, and doubt even more the usefulness in my task of his corollary Freudian/Oedipal clash between poets and their fathers.

Thus in discussing the influence on black writers of European

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writers, I will argue that most African, Afro-American and Caribbean poets writing in English would have had prior immersion in a tradition that includes Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, Yeats, and Eliot; just as those Africans and West Indians writing in French would have read Villon, Corneille, Hugo, Claudel, Rimbaud, Vigny, Mallarme, Breton and Eluard. And I will be concerned with making manifest some of the hidden roads that go from these non-black writers to the black ones.

More importantly, I will attempt to demonstrate the extent to which black writers have adapted these influences and thus appropriated and expanded the European tradition to serve their particular ends as Africans, West Indians, or Afro-Americans writing out of a specific historical situation.

I will use the Nigerian J.P. Clark's poem "Ivbie" to illustrate what I mean by influence. The influence on Clark of the poetry of T.S. Eliot has already been mentioned; this influence is nowhere more apparent than in the first version of this poem which was published by the Mbari Club in 1962. In the subsequent version which was published in A Reed in the Tide "the over-clever dross is eliminated and a more profound and significantly a more African note is stressed."[19] The poem's subject is a recurring one, the destruction of the African's traditional lifestyle by the coming of the European. Clark chose Eliot's "The Waste Land" as his model, adopting the same loose structure, with the various sections of the poem held together only by the pervading imagery of rottenness and the unnatural, the whole poem reading in the end like a rambling agonized monologue on the protagonist's fragmented culture. Also, Clark adopts Eliot's irregular line divisions in which the break is usually designed to give emphasis and heighten the effect of the ruminative speaking voice:

> Is it not late, so awfully
> late, fingering sun-dried husks and
> shells on whose live-sap suckling,
> we stifled our initial pangs?[20]

Further, "Ivbie" is fraught with echoes of specific passages from Eliot. Indeed, the lines quoted above could well have been a parody of Eliot's

> Because I do not hope to turn again
> Because I do not hope
> Because I do not hope to turn
> Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope.[21]

It is these echoes that Clark sought to eliminate in the later version. However, even the sections that were retained are interesting from my point of view because they show Eliot's ubiquitous influence. Let us consider, for instance, this passage which John Povey cites as an example of the more "African" version of the poem:

> A snake-bird fell down early flat
> In the market-place,
> Clinging quick to earth on his belly
> Digging with his bristle fangs
> Open communal graves.

This is one of Clark's visions of the coming of the European — a coming which was sometimes violent, hence the image of the "communal graves." The image of the snake digging with its fangs is a little ludicrous, but the vision is strongly reminiscent of Eliot's:

A woman drew her long black hair out tight
And fiddled whisper music on those strings
And bats with baby faces in the violet light
Whistled, and beat their wings
And crawled head downward down a blackened wall...[22]

In spite of the "surrealism" of African sculpture (about which I will be saying much more) and of some of its folktales, African poetry, especially modern African poetry, tends on the whole not to be fantastical, and deviates from credible imagery only in the direction of hyperbole. Clark's "snake-bird," meant to suggest rather than state the horror of the European presence, derives from post-symbolist Western poetry, a tradition to which Eliot was also very indebted. There are however differences between Eliot's "woman" and Clark's "snake-bird." Eliot's vision is strictly within the Symbolist tradition. The woman has status only within the landscape of the poem. She is totally opaque in the sense that she corresponds to nothing that is observable outside of the world of the poem. In a discussion of this passage Denis Donoghue describes it as a parody of the sentence.[23] Eliot seems to be writing conventionally grammatical sentences, but in fact only the form of the sentence is present here; the conventional function of the sentence, to make statements about the world, is absent.

Clark's vision on the other hand has some of the referentiality of the conventional sentence even as it partakes of the opaqueness of Eliot's example. Certain terms which occur throughout the poem — "ancestral seat," "dung-polished floor," "hybrid lot," "bastard child," "imperial flaws," "Holy Writ" — all these suggest that the poem is about European subversion of Ancestral Africa. On the strength of such clues we interpret the lines quoted above as expressing horror of the intruder. The ubiquitousness of the snake-bird image perhaps deserves mention here. Many of Shelley's poems portray a conflict between a serpent and an eagle,[24] and Mexico has as its national emblem an eagle with a snake caught in its claws. There seems to be a universal tendency to oppose the two creatures: the snake is a common symbol of the autochthonous or the earthbound, and the bird an equally common symbol of a triumphant soaring over the baser elements of our nature. It is because they are perceived as contraries that their union becomes, for Clark, a symbol of the abominable. In short, the image is an archetype. The search for images such as the snake-bird which recur in world literature is one way in which black literature and Western writing could be argued to be related. Such an approach would however bypass the historical fact of cultural contact and, therefore, the problem of influence which is central to my argument.

Povey claims that Eliot's influence on Clark is "less obvious" than Hopkins. I do not find this to be the case in "Ibvie" even if I only concentrate on the more African later sections. For instance, Clark's:

> And all along only the owl
> Safe in her magic cowl
> Saw all.
> I the white bearded woman
> Of night fame saw all.

derive directly from Eliot's:

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> I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs
> Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest —
> ....
>
> (And I Tiresias have foresuffered all
> Enacted in this same divan or bed;
> I who have sat by Thebes below the wall
> And walked among the lowest of the dead.) ["The Waste Land"]

Again Clark's final lines:

> I cannot sleep nor act
> And here I pace, her bastard child,
> A toy twirled on by complexity
> "Gnawing at my finger-tips deep perplexity."

Echo these lines from the beginning and end of "Gerontion":

> Here I am, an old man in a dry month
> ....
> An old man driven by the Trades
> To a sleepy corner.

These passages in which Clark is so obviously echoing Eliot establish the causality which Ihab Hassan suggests as a pre-requisite of a proof of influence. They do show that the Nigerian poet had read his Eliot. The "snake-bird" passage, however, attempts to go beyond imitation, providing an example of influence. Clark is in that passage not directly copying any specific lines from Eliot, but is adopting a whole poetic mannerism, namely, the symbolist image which he learned from Eliot. Clark domesticates his model in a way that betrays the constraints of his cultural background in which literature is didactic and allegorical. He refuses to go the whole way into the realm of private symbols for this would block his poem from making social statements. Nevertheless, the example of Eliot had made him aware of the deep suggestive power of an image which is not tied to a concept either by convention or through some notion of similarity or even by a one-to-one allegorical structure. His snake-bird is thus a compromise: it fits into a didactic allegorical mode and thus represents the European colonizer; but it survives this interpretation and stands as a more generalized image of horror. It thus tries to attain the condition of Eliot's pseudo-sentences.

Influence reveals itself in Clark's example as a radical shift in a writer's style resulting from his use of a model. The shift in style is not so total as to result in mere copying but retains elements of the writer's original style while incorporating what has been learned from the model. The model itself is thus altered in the new work. Influence is not a passive yielding of the present to the past or the African to the European. It is more in the manner of an active appropriation. T.S. Eliot's seminal formulation is germane here:

> Whoever has approved this idea of order......
> .....will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the poet who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities.[25]

In the subsequent chapters, I shall attempt to demonstrate three radically different ways in which the poetry of Europe continues to be relevant in the works of black writers. Ultimately, my aim is to make manifest the composite, hybrid nature of modern black writing and to arouse a less nationalistic investigation into the nature of black literature.

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

[1] There is no need to review the extensive body of theoretical thought which has gone into this issue. T. S. Elliot's "Tradition and the Individual" is central to my argument, but this statement from Rene Wallek and Austin Warren, The Theory of Literature (Harcourt Brace and World, Inc., 1942), p. 271, expresses a similar point:

> Originality is usually misconceived in our time as meaning a mere violation of tradition, or is sought for at the wrong place, in the mere material of the work of art...... To work within a given tradition is perfectly compatible with emotional power and artistic value.

[2] Bernth Lindfors, Folklore in Nigerian Literature (New York: Africana Publishing Co., 1973), p. 31.

[3] Henderson, p. 20.

[4] Clark's poem "Agbor Dancer" may owe part of its inspiration to McKay's "Harlem Dancer," though the point is difficult to prove.

[5] J.P. Clark, "Ibadan" in Poems of Black Africa, ed., Wole Soyinka (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 142.

[6] Ezra Pound, "In a Station of the Metro" in The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1973), p. 338.

[7] The examples abound and I only give a few:

1. Allusions to the Bible and Christian prayer and doctrine

a. I am jealous and passionate
Like Jehovah, God of the Jews.
No greater love had woman
From man than the one I have for you! (Clark, "Olokun," Soyinka, ed., p. 43)

b. Out of the depth my cry:
Give ear and hearken. (Okigbo, "Heavengate," Labyrinths, p. 3)

c. They tell us to forget
The Golgotha we tread....
We who are scourged with hate,
A price upon our head.
They who have shackled us
Require of us a song. (Melvin Tolson, "Dark Symphony," Turner, ed., p. 241)

2. Allusions to other writers.
   a. To John Donne:
      Ablaze with rage I thought,
      Some slave is rotting in this manorial lake,
      But still the coal of my compassion fought
      That Albion too was once
      A colony like ours, part of the continent, piece of the main.
      (Walcott, "Ruins of a Great House," Selected Poems, p. 6)

   b. To Eliot and Marvell:
      So I would to the hills
      Where springs are fresh;
      I turn there to hear time's winged chariot
      hurrying near. (Kofi Awoonor, "Hymn To My Dumb Earth," *Night of My Blood*, Anchor, p. 92)

3. One can add to these Achebe's choice of Eliot's "No Longer at Ease" and Yeats' "...Things fall Apart" as titles for his novels.

[8] Soyinka, "Gulliver," *Poems of Black Africa*, p. 129.

[9] Soyinka, ed., p. 14.

[10] The two poems are best compared by reading them in close proximity. See therefore W.B. Yeats, *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1933), p. 133 and David Cook and David Rubadiri, eds., *Poems from East Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1971), p. 186.

[11] Christopher Okigbo, "Silences," *Transition*, No. 8, p. 14. In a later edition Okigbo rewrote those lines to read:

Dumb-Bells outside the gates
In hollow seascapes without memory, we carry
Each of us an urn of native
Earth, a double handful anciently gathered.
(*Labyrinths*, p. 41)

[12] David Rubadiri, "Stanley Meets Mutesa" in *Poems From Black Africa*, ed., Langston Hughes (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), p. 44.

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[13] T.S. Eliot, "Journey of the Magi," *Selected Poems* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World Inc., 1934), p. 97.

[14] In an interesting article, "The Historical Sense: T.S. Eliot and Two African Writers," *The Conch*, III, i, 1971, p. 59, Lloyd W. Brown sees Rubadiri's poem exclusively as a parody of Eliot's.

[15] Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 154.

[16] Quoted in Ulrich Weisstein, *Comparative Literature and Literary Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 33.

[17] Weisstein, p. 39.

[18] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: OUP, 1973), p. 96.

[19] John Povey, "The Poetry of J.P. Clark," *African Literature Today*, 1, 1965, p. 44.

[20] J.P. Clark, "Ivbie," *A Reed in the Tide* (London: Longmans, 1965).

[21] Eliot, p. 83.

[22] Eliot, p. 65.

[23] Denis Donoghue, "Yeats and the Living Voice" in *Issues in Contemporary Literary Criticism*, ed., Gregory T. Polleta (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1973), p. 446.

[24] See, for example, his long poem "Laon and Cythna" in *The Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927), Vol. 1, p. 257.

[25] T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in *Criticism: The Major Texts*, ed., W.J. Bate (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1952), p. 526.

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CHAPTER TWO

LEOPOLD SENGHOR: FROM SIMPLE TO SENTIMENTAL POETRY

In a famous essay of 1795, Friedrich von Schiller discovers two main stages in the poetic development of a culture. He describes the poetry of the earlier stage as "naive" or "simple" and points out that this poetry is marked by an absence of self-consciousness on the poet's part. The poet at this stage of cultural evolution subscribes to an already given conception of nature and does not seek to constitute the world through the agency of his individual imagination. The simple poet feels no temptation to idealize nature and thus convert nature into symbols of his own personal desires, or to use Schiller's phrase, "raise reality to the ideal." Rather:

> Like the Deity behind this universe, the simple poet hides himself behind his work; he is himself his work, and his work is himself. A man must be no longer worthy of the work, nor understand it, or be tired of it, to be ever anxious to learn who is its author.[1]

The "sentimental" poet who writes at a later cultural stage, writes about nature with a "more ardent sensibility" because he is ready in "opposition to nature." Schiller writes:

> It is because nature, in our time, is no longer in man, and that we no longer encounter it in its primitive truth, except out of humanity, in the inanimate world.

The sentimental poet no longer conceives of nature plastically as "out there;" thus, he composes it subjectively in his work. It is

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the difference between a Ronsard writing about "L'Alouette" with a wealth of realistic detail and a Shelley who transforms his skylark into a symbol for the poet and will not let the bird be a bird. Schiller sums up the difference thus:

> The power of the ancients consists in compressing objects into the finite, and the moderns excel in the art of the infinite.

Two ideas are crucial from Schiller's essay. First, he characterizes the simple poet as not being self-conscious, as tending to disappear into his work to the extent that a reader is not concerned with who is its author. The sentimental poet on the other hand puts the stamp of his individual sensibility on what he writes and thus prompts the reader into wanting to know who is the author. Second is the related point that the ancients compress objects into the finite while the moderns expand them into the infinite. Armed with a plastic, already available conception of nature, the simple poet feels no need to approach the subject by indirection. His language may be supremely pictorial and euphonious but it is always more restricted in its suggestive capacity than the language of the sentimental poet.

The traditional poetry of Africa exhibits these major characteristics of naive poetry. Many of the poems are anonymous but even when their composers can be identified the poetry itself is such that many other composers of the community could have written it. It is not that the traditional African poet does not express a private sentiment, but he expresses it in a manner indistinguishable from that of other poets in the community. In the end there is no uniqueness in the feeling expressed for it becomes a very conventionalized and public emotion.

I will illustrate with two love poems by Marone N'Dyaye, a woman who lived in a neighboring village to Senghor's native Joal. Indeed these poems were translated into French from the Serer language by Senghor himself:

1. Mbare (de) Ndew Ndyaye, je ne veux
   pas que tu travailles à te fatiguer
   Assieds-toi que je te contemple, flanc
   élancé, Kherame (de) Tening!

2. Une épitre que l'un ouvre sur la Grande
   Arène, et le chanteur debout.
   O Mbare (de) Ndew Ndyaye, le jeune -
   homme- de-beauté n'est point de retour.[2]

Senghor's own comment on the first short poem explains that Mbare is the husband of Marone, the poetess, and that Kherame is his sister. He then makes this interesting and rather polemical point:

> On voit combien elle est sincère dans ses amours,
> et délicate. Et l'on dira, après cela, que les
> Noirs ne connaissent pas le vrai amour!

In discussing the quality of the poems I would point to three features in particular. First is the use of the full name of the person to whom the poem is addressed as well as, the name of other members of his family, as in the case of the first example given here. The sonority of the name — Mbare Ndew Ndyaye — contributes to the aural effect of the poem, but more significantly, it is obvious from this practice that love poems like these are part of the praise poem tradition, written to honor the loved one and his or her entire family or lineage. The second quality I wish to point to is the occasional quality of the poems, a fact which is most evident in the second example which, according to Senghor, was composed by Marone on receiving a letter from her husband who was away on a journey. It is conceivable therefore that the first example was put together in response to a specific occasion. It is on account of these two features — the direct address to a named person and the celebration of a specific occasion — that Senghor in his commentary describes these poems as "une poesie functionelle."

The third and most important feature is the imagery. For example in the first poem, the speaker does not want her beloved to tire himself with too much work and asks him, her slender one, to sit down so she may gaze on him. The image of a woman consoling her fatigued beloved functions as an "objective correlative" of tenderness and devotion; the emotion is implied in the gesture. And yet exactly how does this poem establish the correspondence between gazing at a man and the idea of being deeply in love with him? The obvious answer is that the correspondence is not established in the poem. Rather, the poem assumes the correspondence, and it is especially in this feature that the poem is naive. There is nothing really individual about "Assieds-toi que je te contemple, flanc/élancé." A slender waist is accepted among the Serer, as indeed among many other peoples, as handsome on a man; just as a woman gazing into a man's eyes is almost a cliché for being in love, the connection having been established by constant association in many cultures. These images thus depend for their effect on generally accepted equations between image and emotion. Thus in the second poem, the line, "Le jeune - homme- de-beauté n'est point de retour" depends for its effect on an accepted association which sees the figure of a woman or man separated from a loved one as an object of pathos. We witness here the traditional artist's capacity to disappear into his or her work. The choice of these ordinary unadorned situations to carry the burden of the emotion and the absence of factitious images are strongly reminiscent of some of Wordsworth's pronouncements in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads.

Metaphor is an especially rich ground in which to investigate the naive and sentimental dichotomy as it applies to African poetry and more particularly to the poetry of Léopold Senghor. The images discussed above from the poetry of Marone N'Dyaye are not metaphors unless one adopts the position that any naming or interpretation of an object or gesture by means of language is necessarily metaphorical. But, to borrow Jonathan Culler's apt formulation, such a position fails to differentiate "calling my love a rose from calling that flower a rose."[3] Marone's images are not metaphors since the reader does not feel when he comes upon them that there has been a deviation from accustomed referentiality which then imposes on him the necessity of attempting an interpretation.

Real metaphors in traditional poetry function in a similar manner, however, to these images from Marone N'Dyaye. Just as she depends for her effect on conventionalized situations whose emotional

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value is socially accepted, so it would appear that the metaphors in traditional poetry depend for their meaning and effect on publicly held values. Two generalizations can be made about the traditional metaphor. First, it is essentially an adornment, it is a display of literariness in which an already available meaning is made striking or arresting by the apparent distance between the tenor (the meaning or the actual object being described) and the vehicle or literary figure. Usually there is a specific detail in which the two are similar, and it is this point of resemblance which gives the traditional metaphor its specificity of meaning. The following lines from a praise poem to a traditional Yoruba ruler illustrate the point:

> You kill your opponents gently
> Like cutting a calabash in two.
> When the leopard kills
> Its tail trails gently on the ground.[4]

Here the king is pictured first as a warrior and then as a leopard, but meaning is the same in both cases for both images translate into power that is so great that it expresses itself calmly, confidently. These metaphors conform with the rhetorical Aristotelian view of metaphor as substitution, and they are radically different from the kind of metaphor we encounter when Prufrock says, "I have heard the mermaids singing each to each." For here the figure is not translatable except in the vaguest way. It is a metaphor which exemplifies a definition of the figure given by Bachelard:

> A metaphor gives concrete substance to an impression that is difficult to express. A metaphor is related to a psychic being from which it differs. An image on the

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> contrary, product of absolute imagination, owes its entire being to the imagination.[5]

Both Bachelard's definition and the example from Eliot indicate a radical difference between the kind of metaphor one finds in a traditional African poem and what is currently the more fashionable view in the Western world of the nature of poetic metaphor.[6] In the one view of metaphor which is characteristic of naive poetry metaphor describes an already available idea which the poet already shares with his readers. In the other view, metaphor creates a meaning which is a peculiar awareness of the individual poet — a meaning which no other words can express.

The second generalization that can be made about the metaphors of traditional love and praise poems is that they tend to be drawn from a public storehouse. They are often taken from the history of the community and depict events and activities which are important to the community as a whole and have become part of their folklore. These metaphors are often derived from warfare with the warrior figure recurring as a figure for power. Wrestling is another common source of metaphor with the champion wrestler featuring often as a poetic figure for the brave and strong. The mother is yet another common figure which translates as kindness and self-sacrifice. In other words not only is the relationship between vehicle and tenor transparent and specific, but very often the meaning is already available to the community at large. The poet in a real sense merely recycles. Thus in the example already cited, the comparison of the king to a warrior or a leopard (or lion) is a conventional comparison which not only carries an associated emotional value, but serves to reinforce socially accepted notions of some of the qualities befitting a king. Similarly, Marone N'Dyaye in her poem presents situations and assumes poses which are socially accepted as the dignifying love.

The West African poet, Leopold Senghor, likes to see himself and is seen by many of his African readers as continuing the poetic traditions of his people, the Serer, even though he writes in French:

> J'ajouterai que j'écris d'abord pour mon peuple. Et celui-ci sait qu'une *kôra* n'est pas une harpe non plus qu'un *balafong* un piano. Au reste, c'est en touchant les Africains de langue française que nous toucherons le mieux les Francais et, par-delà mers et frontières, les autres hommes.[7]

Senghor's volume, *Nocturnes* (1961), contains a sequence of love poems "Chants de l'Initie" and "Chants pour Signare" which had been published earlier in 1947 and 1949, as well as a sequence of elegies. It is with the love poems that I shall be primarily concerned in this chapter. My concern will be to show through an examination of the use of metaphor that the poet's apprenticeship was served under more schools than the traditional ones of his Serer background. He studied and published translations of the oral poetry of Senegal and that poetry is, as he asserts, an important influence on his work. But Senghor was also well read in Romantic and post-Romantic French poetry. And in this chapter I shall be examining metaphor as a locus for the synthesis of the poet's major influences.

The poem "Ton nom ne m'est pas inconnu" which forms part of the "Chants pour Signare" would seem to represent one polarity in the

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binary opposition of Senghor's influences: it is heavily oral African in its manner. The first three lines:

> Ton nom ne m'est pas inconnu, aigrette de Satang et de
>   Sitor.
> Il est venu de loin, tout chargé des parfums du Pount
> Porté par la bouche des piroguiers et des chameliers au
>   long cours, (p. 181)

displays already a number of characteristically "oral" features: first, there is the description of the woman as an egret which provides our first example of metaphor, a device which is of crucial importance in this chapter. It is the kind of metaphor that can be explained away in Aristotelian terms as substitution. The lady addressed in the poem shares with the egret the qualities of elegance, gracefulness and purity. But she is not simply an egret, she is "aigrette de Satang et de Sitor" where a direct almost hyperbolic metaphor is linked to two euphoniously alliterative names.[8] The poem reveals itself at this point as a panegyric. The deliberate exoticism of the next two lines — the name, heavy with perfumes of Egypt and brought to the poet by barge and caravan — is part of the hyperbolic style of the panegyric, designed to magnify and extol.

The next section (or stanza) contains two sentences, both of which are negative characterizations of the woman — i.e., each one tells a quality which does not apply to her.

> Tu n'es pas le village ouvert que l'on met a genoux avec
>   quelques pétards
> Tandis que se lamentent longuement les meres, comme les
>   chacals sur les tanns
> Tu n'es pas la vierge que l'on attrait avec une maigre louange
> Et trois violoneux en chômage, enfilant des perles de traite.

The familiar traditional device of repetition is employed here with both sentences beginning with "Tu n'es pas", but obviously the repetition serves an additional function to the already important one of patterning: the first sentence is predominantly physical in its suggestions; the second one is more of a moral characterization, especially in the image of the false beads (perles de traite). Together the two sentences functioning through incremental repetition describe the woman's solidity as both physical and moral. Each sentence is a metaphor and once again substitution is the principle operating here. In the first sentence the image of the open village brought to its knees by a few fireworks translates easily into a quality of weakness, while the woman lured barren adulation translates into vanity or a lack of moral strength. But the fact that these "translations" are possible does not deny the visual excellence of the lines which are constructed with leisurely detail.

The next section follows antithetically from the preceding and seeks to describe the woman in terms of the qualities she possesses. Again repetition is a salient feature:

> Tu es le tata qui voit de loin venir la poussière de sang des chevaux-du-Fleuve
> Tu es le tata qui domine les ruses bleues des cavaliers masqués.
> Et il me faut tout l'art des Peuples-de-la-Mer, il me faut la puissance des canons.

Since tata is Serer for fortress, these are metaphors which translate easily into strength and perhaps superior cunning, but part of the metaphor's appeal is in the subtle reference to ancient wars between the ancient residents of that area of Senegal and masked invaders from the Arab North. Similarly, "le Serpent Sacre qui ne parle" can

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be naturalized in terms of the reverence which the snake — especially the python — enjoys among many African peoples, its appearance being usually seen as a propitious event whose full significance must be divined.

The metaphors in the next section are equally easy to decipher, but seem to derive from the litanies of the Roman Catholic Church:

> Toi Ange de l'Enfant Prodigue, Ange des solutions à la
>   clarté de l'aube
> Quand les brouillards toute la nuit hâ! ont pesé profond
>   sur mon angoisse
> Tu es la porte de beauté, la porte radieuse de grâce
> A l'entrée du temps primordial. Et je jouais avec les cailloux
>   et colombes.

S.O. Mezu in his book, *The Poetry of L.S. Senghor*, points to the influence of the litany of the Virgin Mary in the poem, "Femme Noire."[9] The argument, though plausible, is unconvincing, for the rapid listing of attributes which forms the structure of that poem is a favorite device of African praise poetry and Senghor need not have gone to the Catholic Church for it.[10] In the above quoted lines, however, the Christian references are explicit in such words as "Ange" and "l'Enfant Prodigue" and "porte radieuse de grace" is reminiscent of the phrase "gate of heaven" which occurs in the litany to the Blessed Virgin Mary. The metaphor which presents something of a puzzle in the whole poem is the one in "je jouais avec les cailloux et colombes," which resists somewhat the kind of translation operation we have been performing on most of the other metaphors. In contrast with the other metaphors there is no one term which equates the two things being implicitly compared in the way in which "egret" and the woman are equated in terms of their gracefulness. The image does, however, carry fairly clear suggestions, it evokes a state of childlike innocence which is one of the effects that the woman's beauty has on the poet. Could it then not be argued that childlike innocence is the term which equates the poet as affected by his mistress with the image of "playing with pebbles and doves?" My answer is, 'No.' It is doubtful that "childlike innocence" exhausts the possible suggestions which the image can arouse. Abiola Irele offers an entirely different interpretation seeing pebbles and doves as representing polarities — the ground and the sky — in an encompassing vision of the universe vouchsafed unto the poet through the grace of the woman.[11] Though this is an interesting interpretation, it seems to evade the simple question as to why Senghor chooses to represent the sky with "dove" instead of "eagle" for instance. It would seem that dove is chosen for some other quality than its ability to fly — possibly for its conventional innocuousness which has made it a near-universal symbol of peace. Playing with doves is an almost dead metaphor for innocence, a very conventional image of less vitality than the others we have been examining. "Playing with pebbles" is, however, not so easy to pin down. It suggests simplicity, closeness to earth or nature, idleness, purity, poverty (the rich man counts his money while the poor plays with pebbles) — i.e., it is potentially a rather complex metaphor different in kind from any we have encountered so far in this discussion. Potentially, this metaphor is not a substitute for another expression in the now familiar manner of "You are an egret = you are graceful"; rather it expresses an idea for which there is no other expression: potentially it means all that it suggests. In the reality of this particular poem, however, it is heavily weighed down by juxtaposition with the dead metaphor of "playing with doves" whose function now becomes clear — to define and limit the wide suggestive range of "playing with pebbles," thus tying it down to the idea of simplicity or purity.

We may sum up the poem "Ton nom ne m'est pas inconnu" in two ways: in terms of structure and the relation of that structure to forms of traditional poetry; in terms of its use of metaphor and the view of poetry or language implicit therein and how that relates to traditional views of poetry. It is a very orderly poem whose logical/rhetorical structure can be outlined thus: 1. A general statement of the great renown of the lady. 2. An elaboration in terms of what she is not of the woman's character. This section contains two sentences each of which runs into two verses and begins with "Tu n'es pas..." giving an effect of near-perfect symmetry. 3. A sequence of images which tell what she is. The first two of these are listed in two clauses which both begin with "Tu es ..."; both present the woman as an unassailable fortress. The sentence structure is varied at this point when the poet describes his own preparedness to overcome this fortress. This sequence of woman's quality and man's counter property is repeated in the next two sentences of the section, the first of which begins again with "Tu es..." 4. This section introduces another variation in the catalogue of the woman's qualities, and instead of the "Tu es ..." sentence form, we have the more dramatic "Toi Ange de l'Enfant Prodigue, Ange des solutions à la clarté de l'aube".... There is, however, a return to the "Tu es ..." form later in the section — a clause which becomes one of the main organizing elements of the poem. 5. The poet concludes his verbal tribute to his lady by declaring his competence to assume the task of singing her praises.

Repetition then is the main structural device of the poem and is used in a variety of ways. In the second section of the poem, the effect of the repetition is almost one of parallelism: the two sentences with the repeated "Tu n'es pas ..." both contain a main clause, "Tu n'es pas le village ouvert que l'on met a genoux avec quelques petards" and "Tu n'es pas la vierge que l'on attrait avec une maigre louange," but each main clause is augmented by a subordinate or coordinate clause. The result is that the two sentences seem to balance out. Repetition is also used incrementally to give a sense of the overwhelming variety of the woman's qualities.

Another device is the use of complex praise names, grand sounding appellations such as "aigrette de Satang et de Sitor", "Serpent Sacré", "Ange de l'Enfant Prodigue" and "Princesse noire d'Elissa". Finally there is the fairly extensive use of alliteration exemplified in "paroles de pourpre à te parer, Princesse noire d'Elissa", as well as "Satang et de Sitor" and "cailloux et colombes".

All these devices are also characteristic of a great deal of oral poetry and certainly of some of the traditional poems of West Africa which Senghor studies so deeply as exemplified in these lines from "Chant de Feu", a Bambara song which Senghor himself translated into French:

> Feu que les hommes regardent dans la nuit, dans la nuit profonde,
> Feu qui brûles et ne chauffes pas, qui brilles et ne brûles pas,
> Feu qui voles sans corps, sans coeur, qui ne connais pas ni foyer,
> Feu transparent des palmes, un homme sans peur t'invoque. (257)

In terms of its use of metaphor, the poem offers figures in which the tenor is not created by the vehicle, but is already available. As in the traditional poem, it would appear that once the point of the figure is caught, the metaphor is erased, its function fulfilled. However to view the metaphor this way is to miss the point of the image which is not so much to convey meaning, but to clothe an explicit perhaps obvious statement in "beautiful" terms, decoration thus becoming more important than meaning. In this respect, i.e., insofar as its pictorial and rhythmic qualities are at least as important as its meaning, Senghor's metaphor is very literary even if it differs essentially from the modern Western notion of the poetic metaphor. Its function as suggested earlier is to "magnify," to invest the woman portrayed with qualities which are understood by the society to be heroic and noble. Thus the main source of metaphor is warfare, the woman is pictured as a fortress that looks down in scorn on the puny efforts of the enemy. War images are as already suggested very common in the traditional praise poetry of West Africa.

Senghor appears in this poem to imitate almost to perfection the style, especially the use of metaphor, of the traditional, naive oral poet. He covers up extremely well, the important difference between himself and the oral poet namely that the latter stood in a more immediate relationship with the world of warriors, wrestlers and fortresses than Senghor himself does. For the traditional poet, these images come from what Frye calls a "myth of concern." They affirm real social values, whereas for Senghor they are on the way to becoming nothing but poetic images. Senghor is able to bridge the gap in this poem perhaps because he is at least in part very traditional in outlook. But a recurrent feature of modern African writing is a failure by many writers to face up to the consequences of this shift in perspective, the pretense by a modern poet to pure traditionalism.[12]

Not even Senghor is uniformly able to hold up the mask of traditionalism. Or to rephrase the point more positively: in some of his love poems he moves clearly away from the style of the traditional praise or love poem. And this shift is most apparent in his use of metaphor.

In this radically different kind of poem the images tend either to reverberate in many directions instead of yielding one vivid coherent meaning, or to resist naturalization along the familiar line of substitution based on similarity. The poem "Ton visage beauté des temps anciens!..." (p. 178) is a good example. It is a poem which attempts to convey a unique view of a woman's face, not by means of 1). its similarity to some other object 2). nor of images (depicting gestures) which are conventionally endowed with certain meanings, 3). nor of images which within the more limited conventions of literature are endowed with the qualities evoked. On the contrary, Senghor is here attempting to convey that quality primarily through a more intransitive use of imagery — the images employed do not relate to the face through the relationship of similitude for in fact the quality of the moment is unlike any other object. What the images do then is to generate a feeling which approximates the quality of that unique situation. Thus, unlike in the other poems, there is no easy third term which sums up the similarity between the woman's face and the imagery of the poem in the way that fortress had meant strength.

The poem is divided into three parts: the first is a blunt statement of the awesome beauty of the woman's face, making some direct comparison with other objects. In the second and major section the poet tries to evoke the exact situation and mood which has invested the woman's face with that unusual beauty. And it is with this second section that we are especially concerned, attempting as it does to convey a moment of "transfiguration," an unusual epiphany. The last part is really a melodic closure repeating with variations phrases and images from the second and first parts of the poem and thus brings the poem to a rounded finish.

The first part throws together four apparently unrelated images:

> Ton visage beauté des temps anciens! Sortons les pagnes
> parfumés aux tons passés.
> Mémoire des temps sans histoire! C'était avant notre naissance.

The attempt here is to suggest the startling impact of the transfigured face and to suggest through comparison the nature of its beauty. It recalls a piece of ancient fabric as finely wrought as it is venerable. Its beauty has the stillness, the timeless quality of an ancient work of art and seems to take the poet back to a time before he was born. It is worth noting that even the comparison with cloths perfumed with tones of the past — which is an understated comparison in any case — is already a more complex metaphor than what we have tended to observe heretofore. In the first place, it contains within itself another metaphor in the word "perfumed" but, more significantly, what does it mean to suggest that a face is reminiscent of cloths perfumed with the tones of the past? Obviously, no direct translation is possible — only a widening ring of suggestions some of which I have already mentioned: the face is "finely fashioned," "venerable," or "holy," "wise," "valuable," "only rarely seen or used," "mysterious" etc. etc.

The second section, the evocation of what T.S. Eliot calls "the moment in the rose garden" when the transfiguration took place, is even more interesting, posing challenges of interpretation. The section begins with the lines:

Nous revenions de Dyônewâr, nos pensees s'attardaient
    sur les bolongs
Où luisaient, faible écho de soie, les ailes des éloges cadencés.

which immediately raises interesting problems of naturalization. What is the significance in a love poem of the "coming back from Dyonewar," a village close to Senghor's native Joal? On the surface, the statement is no more metaphorical than "Let me gaze at you," but within the context of the poem its significance ought to be accounted for. It could have a publicly available significance: for instance, it might be the scene of periodic wrestling contests involving the young men of Joal: thus, the poet and his beloved could be returning from a wrestling contest — a point reinforced by the later reference in the poem to "the champion." But such an interpretation hardly exhausts the possibility of the image. "Dyônewar" has an anapestic metrical form which repeats the metrical structure of "revenions" thus making for metrical symmetry in that half of the line,

Nŏus rĕvĕnións/ dĕ Dyŏ̂nĕwár/........

It also possesses through its deployment of "back" vowels a hollow cavernous sound that contributes to the atmosphere of awesome mystery which is the real subject of the poem, an atmosphere reinforced by the image of the mangroove swamps where the poet and his beloved are lingering. Thus, the line is relevant in the context of this poem more, or at least as much, for initiating a certain atmosphere than for its possible referential meaning.

The rest of the section is designed to help intensify this atmosphere. The swamps are supposed to be echoing with praise songs —

it is not clear yet who is singing — but in a remarkable instance of synaesthesia, the songs echoing in the dark of the swamp are said to be a gleam which appeals to the sense of sight rather than hearing, while the comparison of the softness of the echo to silk introduces the sense of touch or feeling. Thus, what I have called the awesome eeriness of the atmosphere is something that is not simply visual but affects and involves the senses of touch and hearing as well. The next three lines present images which are equally "distorted" in the sense of having been shaped almost entirely by the mood the poet seeks to convey, and having little to do with objective reality. The creatures of the swamps are said to be in ecstasy; the light of the stars is said to be an "echo of the divine"; and a woman singing in the boat is likened to a carved figurehead.

This 'description' is extremely self-conscious, indeed it is not a description so much as a fictitious atmosphere which creates the mood of the poem. Unlike the images we observed in the traditional Serer poems, these do not belong to the public domain, nor do they, unlike the images of some of the poems already discussed, belong to a conventionalized set of poetic imagery. In short, then, where in the case of "Ton nomme ne m'est pas inconnue..." Senghor writes a simple poem, here he is writing a poem which can only be described in Schiller's terms as sentimental. The swamp is only vaguely a swamp: what it really becomes is a metaphor for an experience which in words other than the words of the poem can only

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be summed up in the rather unsatisfactory terms I have been using — awesome, mysterious, eerie, transfigured. To paraphrase Schiller again, the poem is not a description, however decorative, but an idealization.

Have I been misled by Schiller into seeing too radical a split between this poem and others already discussed? Is it in fact the case, that the metaphors of traditional African poetry lend themselves to ready translation in a public manner, being hardly ever intransitive? Senghor himself has pointed to the strong affinity between African art and Surrealism, implying that African art has been traditionally non-realistic in the sense of referring to a received objective world. However not enough attention has been paid to Senghor's differentiation of African "surrealism" and European surrealism.[13] For in asserting that the "unrealistic" dream-like or nightmarish forms of African art do in fact represent generally accepted realities, Senghor is really arguing that even at its most surrealistic, African art is in fact allegorical. This very obvious implication which is borne out by the public ceremonial or even didactic character of traditional African art seems to have escaped most of Senghor's commentators because, like him, they are more interested in asserting that in surrealism Europe had discovered (or re-discovered) something which the African always possessed. For instance, African writers always point to the influence of African sculpture on Picasso's "Les Demoiselles D'Avignon" — an influence which Picasso never denied. What they fail to mention is that

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Picasso, in adopting the forms of African sculpture, eroded it of some of its meaning in a similar manner to what happens when a modern African uses traditional myths: while African sculpture both means and suggests — for instance the nightmarish Ogboni mask of the Yoruba[14] suggests sheer power by means of its outlines alone and becomes therefore an "allegorical" and publicly accepted embodiment of the god of war — a Picasso version would only suggest. It is possible to find many examples of "surrealist" elements in traditional African literature as attested to in the novels of Amos Tutuola, these elements often serve an accepted didactic function. Consider these splendid lines, translated from the Yoruba, from a poem on Eshu, the trickster god of fate:

> If it had not been for his huge size,
> He would not be visible at all.
> Lying down, his head hits the roof,
> Standing up, he cannot look into the cooking pot.
> He throws a stone today
> And kills a bird yesterday.[15]

There is some element of the irrational here, but it is not difficult to resolve: the operating principle is paradox aimed at suggesting the unpredictable nature of Eshu. Furthermore, the images are very easy to visualize individually, even if they do not follow logically one from the other, i.e. it is the second line of each couplet which negates the otherwise meaningful first, and renders it apparently nonsensical. Each individual image refers to the ordinary world which has itself not undergone any major transformations. Thus, in spite of the paradoxes, the poem is naive. The

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"irrationality" of these lines is profoundly different from that which is posed by a line like Eluard's,

Elle est debout sur mes paupières[16]

a line whose phanopoeia is like something Salvador Dali would paint, and is packed with a multiplicity of suggestions.

The Nigerian critic Abiola Irele is correct in locating outside African tradition the source of Senghor's shift into the sentimental.

> A more rounded view of Senghor's diction would be to see it as a combination of the direct and rhetorical expression of the French Romantics (Victor Hugo comes readily to mind) with the allusive and elliptical manner of the moderns established by Baudelaire.[17]

What Irele leaves out in this statement is the contribution made by traditional African poetry to Senghor's rhetorical grandeur which Irele gives solely to Hugo. Irele's observation about Senghor's debt to the "moderns" since Baudelaire seems to me to be very accurate. The style of French poetry in the period after 1870 had abandoned description or the expression of intellectual ideas which were seen as superficial, in favor of an imaginative and apparently irrational style which sought to express deeply private and mysterious intuitions. Mallarmé's "Brise Marine" and its intoxicated exhortation to set off on a journey at once magically attractive and also fraught with peril becomes a metaphor, a concrete expression, of a feeling, of a complex of feelings for which the poetic metaphor is the only expression. Ultimately, the "meaning" of the journey symbol is uncertain and the poem stands as the expression of the thrill and fear surrounding the undertaking of any great venture into uncharted regions, including the venture into the writing of poetry. The surprising thing about Mallarmé's famous last line is that the charm of the song of the seamen is captured without the slightest effort to describe it. Mallarmé's recognition of the world out there is minimal and natural objects in his poem have a status and value conferred only by the poem. It is this minimal recognition of the world out there and this inward turn that Senghor learned from the French moderns' imagery. His line from the poem under discussion, "Nous revenions de Dyônewar..." functions in a manner similar to Mallarmé's "Mais, ô mon Coeur, entends le chant des matelots!"[18]

Perhaps because of the Senegalese poet's interest in surrealism, or perhaps on account of his treatment of the theme of love and the beauty of a woman, it has been claimed that the poems in *Nocturnes* recall the work of Paul Eluard. Such a claim is made, for instance, by John Reed and Clive Wake in the introduction to their English translation of his poems.[19] This claim is a little careless. Eluard, the surrealist, uses images in a different way, taking one step further in the break between image and the external world, and thus using these images to compose a different world, a surreal world which negates the difference between dream and fact or between inner and outer realities. Eluard's famous line:

> "La terre est bleue comme une orange"

is a good illustration of the poet's use of imagery. It is not simply that an image from the external world such as a journey by boat is invested with such an aura that it suggests an ineffable mood; the images seek to more actively recompose the world by investing its familiar forms with magical colors and shapes. Feminine beauty is the great agent which liberates Eluard from "dead" insights, and reveals for him and through him a side of the world hidden by convention and habit, the surreal world.

It is worth recalling again Bachelard's differentiation of metaphor from image:

> A metaphor gives concrete substance to an impression that is difficult to express. Metaphor is related to a psychic being from which it differs. An image, on the contrary, product of absolute imagination, owes its entire being to the imagination.[20]

Where Mallarmé writes in an essentially metaphorical mode about objects in such a way as to point beyond the objects to their deeper significance, Eluard's "object" is already recomposed in the poem to contain within itself the qualities emanating from a different mode of awareness, i.e., it is an image in Bachelard's sense, owing its entire being to the imagination. It is a more explicit kind of mystery in Eluard than in Mallarmé: perhaps indeed it is Mallarmé who has all the mystery while Eluard is merely marvellous. The surrealist takes the reader into an unfamiliar world which dazzles with its novelty and variety but does not leave him in the middle of an ever widening circle of suggestions as Mallarmé does. Thus, the following lines present no interpretative puzzles for the reader, but do offer a startlingly fresh view of the beloved woman who appears in these lines as a being thoroughly dependent on the creativity of the man who loves her, who in turn is totally dependent on her:

> Elle est debout sur mes paupières
> Et ses cheveux sont dans les miens,
> Elle a la forme de mes mains,
> Elle a la couleur de mes yeux,
> Elle s'engloutit dans mon ombre
> Comme une pierre sur le ciel.[21]

Post-Romantic French poetry introduced Senghor to a radically different use of language, a more subjective language necessitating either the intransitive metaphor or the liberated image which reconstitutes the world. And even though Senghor's own critical writing would seem to link some of his poems more with surrealism, he is in fact much closer to the Symbolists. In his poem, the world is not reconstituted — it does not become blue like an orange — so much as invested with a suggested resonance, turned into a symbol like Shelley's Skylark. His introductory remarks to the glossary which he provides at the end of Nocturnes is relevant here. He writes:

> Certains lecteurs se sont plaints de trouver dans mes poèmes des mots d'origine africaine, qu'ils ne "comprennent" pas.
>
> Ils me le pardonneront, il s'agit de comprendre moins le réel que le surréel — le sous-réel. (p. 275)

In suggesting that the "surreal" is available even to readers who do not know the African words he uses, Senghor is in fact hinting that surreal "meaning" is made available through the interplay of words themselves, i.e., that obtaining the surreal meaning of a line like:

> Nous revenions de Dyônewar,

is not dependent on a knowledge of the actual, geographical place.

The meaning is the sum of suggestions which come from the word within its total context in the poem. Furthermore, it is clear that his use of the word "surreal" does not allow for a differentiation between any non-referential, purely suggestive, use of language and that totally subversive style employed by the surrealists proper. Indeed, it would appear that for Senghor "surreal" means suggestive or even symbolic. But what is most significant of all in Senghor's above quoted remark is the implicit denial of the claim he makes elsewhere that for the African artist surrealism depends on socially accepted equivalences — which would make it necessary for the reader to know what "Dyonewar" means for somebody from that part of Senegal, not simply in terms of whether it is a town or village, but also its ritual importance in the minds of the locals. Senghor is thus expressing a symbolist attitude in preference to the more traditional allegorical one and is himself refuting those African critics who see him merely in terms of his "defence and illustration" of African civilisation. Admittedly, he does play it both ways and in the very next paragraph he writes:

> J'ajouterai que j'ecris d'abord pour mon peuple. Et celui-ci sait qu'une kora n'est pas une harpe non plus qu'un balafong un piano.

But the privilege he accords his African reader is not that he will automatically understand, but that knowing what the words mean ordinarily will make him more likely to perceive their suggestive associations. In the final analysis, he is affirming the capacity of his poetry to generate its own meaning as opposed to that meaning which depends on ordinary usage or convention.

It is now time to examine another poem of Senghor's which shows the influence of the modern European attitude towards language and metaphor, while paying particular attention to the role in such a poem of images taken from traditional African life and history — images which in the purely traditional poem would function in elaborate comparisons aimed at equating the subject of the poem with something grand. The poem, "Dans la nuit abyssale en notre mère..." (p. 182) is ideal for such an examination. It is a poem which expresses various kinds of calm and unrest. In the first section, comprising just two lines, the awful tranquility of the relatively asexual existence of childhood is suggested in the particularly resonant image of playing at drowning in the womb of the mother. And already we encounter an example of the kind of metaphor which marks off this poem from a traditional lyric. What does it mean to play at drowning in the womb of one's mother? Obviously, a single finite interpretation is difficult but there is a unity to the cluster of suggestions generated. However, following upon this "modern" metaphor are two very rhetorical and traditional ones in which the obviousness of the comparisons implied makes for easy translation, the cotton tree and the champion are familiar and conventionalized metaphors of peace and security which come out of village life and serve not only to extend the meaning of the first rather intransitive metaphor, but to anchor that meaning to an African "reality," a rural and artificial reality. Thus the first two lines express a profound carefreeness through a series of diverse images — being in the mother's womb and cushioned in its engulfing fluids, being shaded by the amplitude of the cotton tree as well as by the watchful gaze of the champion wrestler.

In the next section the poem expresses a post-adolescent restlessness which may be understood sexually but is capable of a much wider interpretation and it is here that the play of images becomes especially interesting. The dominant image of a quest is introduced in a series of images whose sole function is to suggest remoteness and strangeness: the poet speaks of having followed his unquiet quest:

> Aux sables du Levant à la Pointe-du-Sud, chez les Peuples-de-la-Mer-verte
> Et chez les Peuples d'Outre-mer. Et la conque au loin dans tes rêves, c'était moi.

An image like "the people of the green sea" calls for interpretation but resists any attempt to restrict the meaning beyond the generalized suggestions of the strange, the remote, the romantic. Equally interesting is the metaphor, "Et la conque au loin dans tes rêves, c'était moi". What does the poet mean by comparing himself to a faraway seashell in the woman's dreams? Again, it is a metaphor which works by deferring meaning, resisting translation, offering a multiplicity of suggestions but no definite meaning. And it should be clear at this point, that Senghor's metaphors are radically different from those observed in the poem, "Ton nom ne m'est pas inconnu..." and are, like the symbols of Mallarmé, designed to produce an emotional effect rather than portray an object. "La conque au loin dans tes rêves" suggests what is lost, abandoned in a magical, wonderful world; and in this context the question as to why "conque" rather than "pierre" is easily answered: "conque" or "seashell" because of the natural capacity of the object to echo as well as its ornate exterior gives hints of mystery and romance which "pierre" (or "stone") would lack.

It is in this context of intransitive metaphors that we find a series of images which seem to belong with the daylight world of praise poetry:

> Était-ce toi la Nyominka, qui à Moundé offrit l'honneur
> d'un tabouret
> A ma lassitude cendreuse? Et l'ombre de sa maison Sâr!
> n'était pas mince.
> Ton père était docteur chez les Askias, ton hoirie du quatorze cents volumes.
> La plume du talbé chantait tes cils, l'odeur des parchemins
> teignait tes mains
> Mieux que henné mieux qu'antimoine. Était-ce toi la
> négresse aux yeux verts, Soyan?

It would be possible to argue that with these images the speaker expresses the solidity which the woman represents against the flux of his earlier quest, but such a position is too simple; far from representing solidity, these images are presented in interrogatives and represent a tentative effort on the poet's part to define what the woman means to him — i.e., the mystery of the earlier part of the section pervades into this portion.

Indeed, placed in this new context, these traditional images from the praise poem tradition function differently from what we have already observed. The image of the Nyominka that at Moundé offered the honour of a stool to my tired, ashen fatigue is obviously different from the tata that sees from afar the bloody dust of the horses of the River: where the second metaphor reduces easily into a simile, i.e., "You are like the fortress that sees from afar .....," the first resists such an expansion. Given the poem's "unreal" atmosphere, the image of the Nyominka does not stand out by itself as a rhetorical metaphor — it is part of a wide metaphor which is the poem. The same is true of the other images taken from the praise poem tradition. "Your father was a doctor among the Askias..." could be expanded into a simile such as "Your wisdom is as deep as one who is descended from a long line of scholars," but the point of the image is more in the remoteness or the aura of the name, "Askia," which was the name adopted by the rulers of the ancient Sudanese empire of Songhai. The simile would be most inappropriate in this context for Senghor is not saying that the woman is like such and such, but that she is those things. The images do not describe the woman, they create her. The series of images which follow are a little less "African" in the sense of deriving from the history and culture of old Africa and relate less to the praise poems:

> ....Etait-ce toi la
>   négresse aux yeux verts, Soyan?
> Contre l'épaule de la Nuit cubaine, si j'ai pleuré sur tes
>   cheveux fanés!
> Prêtresse du Vaudou en l'Ile Ensorcelée, mais souviens-toi
>   du victimaire
> Aux yeux droits et froids de poignards..... (p. 183)

Again these images reinforce an atmosphere of mystery over which the woman presides like an African sybil. For instance, the image of the negress with green eyes is hardly the description of an actual woman, nor can it be understood in terms of a quality belonging to an actual woman; once again it is part of the wider metaphor which is the woman of this poem. It is interesting that in the next line the image of the faded hair suggests that she is an old woman, an unusual figure in a love poem, but entirely in place in this landscape of green seas, enchanted islands, voodoo priestesses, and ancient Sudanese empires. The woman of this poem is a "sentimental" figure, fashioned as a response to the poet's individual restlessness; and she stands here in contrast to that earlier portrait of herself which was drawn in consonance with conventional and public canons of what a beloved woman should look like, and whose qualities are natural ones.

What we have observed then are two radically different approaches to metaphor and therefore two very different kinds of poetry, both coexisting in the same slim volume of love poems. There is no question that the poet was at home in either manner and indeed did not see them as mutually exclusive. This is proved by his use of what I have called praise poem imagery in "Dans la nuit abyssale" as well as his adoption in that poem of the grandiloquent style of praise poetry. However, insofar as the unrhetorical metaphor is not a common feature of traditional African poetry, and insofar as oral poetry in Africa tended to be naive in the sense of depending for its imagery either on an accepted reality or on a

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stock of conventionalized images, Senghor must be seen as having taken, for an African, a great leap into a different mode of expression, a step which affected even his way of looking at the world around him — a world no longer capable of adequately expressing what his beloved means to him or what her face looks like. He took this step, however, without abandoning his African soil, and, indeed, made the landscape, the history, the poetic imagery and rhythm of Africa an integral part of this new deployment of metaphor, this intensely personal way of looking at the world.

I have chosen to examine the problem of the two metaphors in Senghor by concentrating on a relatively limited corpus of his work, namely that section of love poems in Nocturnes entitled "Chants pour Signare." I have done this because there exists in translation a wide range of African love poems, and this fact made it easy for me to ascertain Senghor's indebtedness to that source and to ascertain by elimination what was not African in his work. Also my argument could be best made through a rather close examination of a few poems and these love poems were as good a place as any for that examination, especially, since on account of their non-polemical subject matter, since Senghor is therein not singing the glories of African history or civilization, they have tended to be overlooked by commentators. However, the dualism of metaphor which I observe in the love poems is to be found in other areas of the poet's work and is an inescapable feature of his work, sometimes co-existing in the same poem. Thus, for instance, in his famous poem, "New York," in Ethiopiques the initial presentation of the city is through a series of realistic images and rhetorical metaphors:

> Pas un rire d'enfant en fleur, sa main dans ma main fraîche
> Pas un sein maternel, des jambes de nylon. Des jambes et
> des seins sans sueur ni odeur. (p. 116)

while the integrated culture which Senghor wants the world to be is evoked in these terms:

> Voici revenir les temps très anciens, l'unité retrouvée la
> réconciliation du Lion du Taureau et de l'Arbre
> L'idée liée à l'acte l'oreille au cœur le signe au sens.
> Voilà tes fleuves bruissants de caimans musqués et de lamantins aux yeux de mirages. (p. 117)

where the metaphors create (rather than mean) a sense of teeming natural abundance and harmony, and have no individual translatable meaning as they would in the allegorical structures of traditional oral poetry. Thus, while crocodile may very well be a common image in African folklore, Senghor's "caimans musqués" are a different creature, which do not stand for any one quality, but suggests a more generalized mood; it is a metaphor in the more modern sense of the word, even if it comes out of the African landscape and culture.

Senghor's critics have overlooked this dualism, blinded perhaps by the brilliance of the rhetoric of Negritude. Their claim that Senghor is a defender of African culture has been supported either by demonstrating that his themes are African, i.e., he writes about African things; or that his images (masks, villages, swamps, wrestlers) are from African sources; or that his rhythms are imitative of African drum beats. The influence of Europe is usually sought for in his occasional verbal resonance to Paul Claudel or St.

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John Perse.[22] Only one critic has to my knowledge concerned himself with examining the problem from the point of view of the comparative social conditions which underlie traditional poetry and those of modern poetry. In an essay on Senghor, John Reed writes as follows:

> The need to make the evocation of the world and the acceptance of it central to poetry only arises when the sense of cosmos has been lost and when rejection instead of acceptance is conceivable... The cosmos of the poem is also the world of the poet's own experience, is indeed the medium through which his own experience can find coherence, meaning and hence expression .... Senghor's poetry asserts a universe on the poet's authority, a universe which is an ordering and an ordination of African, Mediterranean, Gallic, Catholic, Islamic elements.[23]

Reed sees Senghor, together with Claudel, Perse, and Whitman, as a poet working within an unstable and diverse culture who therefore feels the need to impose personal structures of understanding on the flux of their experience.

There is validity to this observation insofar as it applies to Senghor and the majority of African writers. For modern African literature begins on an elegaic note: Camara Laye's L'Enfant Noir looks back from Paris on a civilization gone for ever, just as Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart is the work of a man who having taken a university degree in English in Nigeria's modern University of Ibadan decides to reconstruct fictionally his ancestral village to show how it was before the European invader altered it forever. With the sense of passing away so overwhelmingly present in African writing, it is surprising that African critics have pretended for so long that African literature has remained unaffected by the change,

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insulated from Europe. The contemporary writer inhabits a world that is different from that in which the oral traditions evolved. His education, usually in an urban setting, removes him from the cycle of activities — farming, cattle rearing, wrestling, story telling, song making, serenading — which provided the themes and propagated the forms of traditional literature. Where these models are available to him, as often they are, they are relics from an ancestral world, needing to be refashioned for the benefit of a different audience, a society (of which the writer is himself a part) lacking the cohesive communalities of traditional life.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

[1] Friedrich von Schiller, "On Simple and Sentimental Poetry" in W.J. Bate, ed., *Criticism: The Major Texts* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1952), pp. 408-412.

[2] Leopold S. Senghor, trans., "Marone N'Dyaye," *Poètes d'Aujourdhui* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1958), p. 172.

[3] See Jonathan Culler, "Commentary on a Symposium on Metaphor," *New Literary History*, VI, i, 1974, pp. 219-229.

[4] Ulli Beier, ed., *African Poetry: An Anthology of Traditional African Poems* (Cambridge: CUP, 1966), p. 42.

[5] Gaston Bachelard, "Drawers, Chests and Wardrobes," Gregory T. Polletta, ed., *Issues in Contemporary Literary Criticism* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1973), p. 428.

[6] A cogent statement of the view of metaphor which is essentially post-Romantic and is especially important to the New Critical view of poetry is found in the post-Derridaean summary by Jonathan Culler of a discussion on metaphor in *New Literary History*, VI, i, 1974, p. 219. Culler writes:

> Literature is of interest only because its signs do not simply replace other "proper" signs, or rather because its signs do, precisely stand for *something else*, for "the other" in its possible developments, and thus are different from a meaning which they defer. Literature's power has been thought to lie in metaphor, but in fact it is precisely literature's resistance to metaphor, resistance to replacement operations, which are the source of this power.

[7] Leopold Sedar Senghor, *Poèmes* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1964), p. 275.

[8] Ruth Finnegan, in *Oral Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 115, lists the complex praise name and the hyperbole as some of the features of the praise poem.

[9] *The Poetry of L.S. Senghor* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1973), p. 23.

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[10] See also Abiola Irele, Selected Poems of Leopold Sedar Senghor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 32, for some more discussion of this point.

[11] Irele, p. 130.

[12] Many African poets exhibit this tendency, but the most spectacular is Kofi Awoonor many of whose early poems simply translate without regard for the modern context the traditional songs of the Ewe people of Ghana. See for instance his "Songs of War" in Modern Poetry From Africa, ed., Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier (Penguin, 1963).

[13] Senghor, Liberte 1: Negritude et humanisme (Paris: Edition du Seuil, 1971), p. 212.

[14] See for example William Bascom, African Art in Cultural Perspective (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), p. 149.

[15] Ruth Finnegan, A World Treasury of Oral Poetry (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 150.

[16] Paul Eluard, "L'Amoureuse", in Peter Broome and Graham Chester, eds., An Anthology of Modern French Poetry (Cambridge: CUP, 1976), p. 108.

[17] Irele, p. 35.

[18] Broome and Chester, An Anthology, p. 37.

[19] John Reed and Clive Wake, trans., Nocturnes, Senghor, by (London: Heinemann, 1969), p. x.

[20] Polletta, p. 428.

[21] Broome and Chester, An Anthology, p. 108.

[22] See Irele, pp. 11-12, and Sylvia Washington Ba, The Concept of Negritude in the Poetry of Leopold Sedar Senghor (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 126-127.

[23] John Reed, "Léopold Sédar Senghor," Bruce King and Kolawole Ogungbesan, eds., A Celebration of Black and African Writing (Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press, 1975), pp. 108-109.

CHAPTER THREE

DEREK WALCOTT: DEFINING THE WEST INDIES THROUGH EUROPEAN LITERATURE

The geographical fact that the West Indies is a group of islands provides the favorite metaphor with which the inhabitants of the Antilles describe their existence. The West Indian often sees himself as uprooted by hurricanes of history from his ancestral Africa and dumped in a no man's land between that continent and Europe.[1] He often sees himself as deprived of the cultural traditions both of Africa and of the West and obliged to fashion a new culture from no traditions.[2] Each West Indian sometimes sees himself in interpersonal relations as an island. The existence of a vital folk culture forged out of diverse elements from Europe, Africa and Asia including cricket, the calypso, and now reggae; creole versions of English and French spoken idioms; a distinctive cuisine; and a growing body of literature — even these facts of a common West Indian culture have not entirely dispelled the West Indian's notion that he is a man in the middle of nowhere, the quintessential islander.

Paradoxically this notion has liberated the West Indian writer to range freely in his search for models. Without a distinctive culture, he is thus free of guilt at having betrayed West Indian traditions, and free of that African (and Afro-American) need to deny other "external" influences. Césaire is indebted to Bréton, Braithwaite borrows widely — and in particular from the oral poetry of the Akan people of Ghana, and Derek Walcott, the best known Caribbean poet in English, draws heavily upon a diversity of models. His early poetry was described by a reviewer as the "jackdaw collections"[3] of a poet who, not having yet found a personal style, tries on one poetic mask after another. This Protean appearance could be distinctively West Indian.

It would be an endless task to attempt to chart out the full range of Walcott's sources, for the evidence of his immersion in Western intellectual and literary traditions is overwhelming. I will merely suggest the roughest outlines of that indebtedness and move to more practicable concerns. His poetry contains references to Mallarmé, Donne, St. Paul, Milton, Hemingway, Dante, Homer, Hart Crane, Auden and Spender. Dylan Thomas and T.S. Eliot seem to me to be his most important models; they provide him with a *vision* that becomes an abiding part of his work.

His imitations of Thomas begin with youthful imitations (even substitutions or variations) in which he writes Caribbean versions of Thomas' poems. By merely copying formal features, he trivializes his model. Consider for instance, these lines from his "Elegy":

> I shall not hurl death taunts and tantrums
> Nor blast with violent words the yellow grave
> Under the crooked tree, where Lazarus lies like History,
> For greater than death is death's gift, that can
> Behind the bright dust that was the skeleton

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> (Who drank the wine and believed the blessed bread)
> Can make us see the forgotten price of man
> Shine from the perverse beauty of the dead,[4]

borrow their idea from Dylan Thomas':

> I shall not murder
> The mankind of her going with a grave truth
> Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath
> With my further
> Elegy of innocence and youth.[5]

Walcott's relative immaturity shows through in a number of ways. His statement is the conventional Christian one which sees death as the way to eternal life. His poem is precisely the kind of "grave truth" which Thomas seeks to avoid. And his grandiloquent manner, copied from the Welshman, contributes to that gravity. The heavily accented, "I shall not hurl death taunts and tantrums" with its open vowel sounds and alliteration sets a declamatory tone and brings the poem to the brink of bathos, and the young Walcott is not able to save his poem from tipping over. In the next line, "yellow" is not able to gain more than a literal resonance in its context, and understood literally it jars with the heavy rhythms and lofty diction of the previous line. "Crooked tree" poses similar problems. "Lazarus" introduces the theme of Christian immortality, but why is Lazarus said to lie "like History?" Is the image saying that Lazarus will rise and live again, just as history repeats itself? Again, there is bathos in this interpretation of the image, yet the blatantly Christian position of the poem permits no other way of recovering the image. The remaining lines quoted are a clear expression of Christian sentiment — a case of "what oft was thought" finding rather melodious expression.

Thomas' poem differs from Walcott's primarily on account of its greater opacity. The poem ends with the famous line, "After the first death there is no other" which crystallizes the paradoxical quality of this poem. The line — and indeed the whole poem — could be given the Christian interpretation already found in Walcott: after death we pass into life eternal. But the line survives that interpretation, i.e., it could be interpreted another way, namely, that Christian or not, we only die once; and there is no way of knowing which of these two interpretations is the "correct" one, or whether the line does not mean both at once. Thomas, of course, provides the model for Walcott's lofty style:

> I shall not murder
> The mankind of her going with a grave truth

has an undeniable soap-box quality, but it is also true that because the thought expressed is not as predictable as in Walcott, Thomas stands at a greater distance from bathos, and seems to be saying that to smooth over the fact (including the pain and mystery) of death with sententious homilies is to destroy its place in human life or simply that death is part of the human being and is to be accepted as such. The statement is not necessarily Christian, indeed the joyous acceptance of death as nature's way is Wordsworthian. Also, the rhythmical exuberance is more controlled in Thomas than in Walcott; the Welshman's lines have more pauses, a greater meditativeness than the West Indian's. But here at any rate is a very definite instance of a black poet going to Europe for models upon which to write an elegy.

His poem "Choc Bay" is to my mind more successful as an imitation of Thomas' "Fern Hill." The poem which is a joyful remembrance of the sea-circled region where the poet spent his boyhood belongs to a genre that can be traced back at least to early books of Wordsworth's Prelude, where as in Thomas' "Fern Hill," the region of one's childhood is imbued with an atmosphere of primaeval holiness, but there is no doubt in spite of the echoes of Hopkins that it is Thomas who is Walcott's immediate model.

The West Indian's:

O herds of the bright
Archery of fish, O Light
Laying your coins on the beach,
I flew like the hawk above time's reach.
I was hero the caves halloed,
Horizon Haloed
And O dead Venus, under waves riding
Ark of the Virgin, ever abiding
Mother of fishermen, you showed

It was all a wise
Hoax to my sunblind eyes;
The belled leaves chimed away my days.
O Time, what if I gave the wrong things praise
The wildest sorrows about?
All that I have and want are words
To fling my griefs about,
And salt enough for these eyes,
For the trapped wheeling of the holy birds
And my bare footed flight from Paradise, (In a Green Night, p. 25)

derive some of the ideas and technical devices from these lines from Thomas' "Fern Hill":

And honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house
Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long,
    In the sun born over and over
        I ran my heedless ways,
My wishes raced through the house high hay
And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows

In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs
      Before the children green and golden
      Follow him out of grace,

Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would take me
Up to the swallow thronged lofy by the shadow of my hand
      In the moon that is always rising,
      Nor that riding to sleep
I should hear him fly with the high fields
And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land,
Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means
      Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.[6]

Thematically, Walcott could be said to be writing a Caribbean version of "Fern Hill" changing the Welsh rural scenery to a tropical seaside one. Both poems are concerned with the passage from happy innocent childhood to a less golden adulthood and the realization of Time's darkening hold over life. In both poems, the passage from childhood to maturity is seen as a loss of divine favor — "grace" in Thomas, "paradise" in Walcott. But even so we are in very general territory: the child as favored by the gods is as old as The New Testament where Jesus reminds his disciples that unless they become as children they will not enter the heavenly kingdom; and the idea of the child as still possessing an intuitive and divine wisdom is very common in post-romantic Western writing. Besides, Walcott swings away from Thomas in a very important way. Where in "Fern Hill," the movement is from golden childhood to the awareness of death, and mortality is the ultimate curse that time brings, Walcott emphasizes the awareness of nothingness which maturity brings, deploring the fact the "dizzy raptures" of childhood are in fact an empty hoax. Again Wordsworth belongs intimately in this cluster of themes and some background in the poetry of the English Romantic poet would deepen one's understanding of Walcott's poem. The West Indian finds that his only creative consolation lies in the use of language to "fling my griefs about" — a consolation which is at once more resigned and more saddening than Dylan Thomas'.

It is when we combine this theme with Walcott's poetic mannerisms that the debt to Thomas becomes undeniable. Walcott's verse form is very different of course. His shorter lines, while robust in their effect, do not have the expanse, the sense of endless activity which is part of the Welsh poet's recollection of his childhood. We can nevertheless observe some remarkable resemblances. At the simplest level is the imitation of Thomas' love for alliteration. Thus for example, "Fern Hill's" "farm forever fled from the childless land" or its "house high hay" are matched by Walcott's

> I was hero, the caves halloed
> Horizon Haloed,

even if the rush of vowels makes Walcott's lines rather difficult to articulate, a case of unintended cacophony. There is also the metaphorical use of Christian ideas in both poems to capture the innocence of the child's existence, a convention which is not found in the early sections of "The Prelude" where the forces that impinge on the child are presented as pagan albeit very moral. Thus in "Fern Hill" we have "lamb white days," "Adam and maiden," "sabbath," "holy streams"; while in "Choc Bay" there are "Horizon Haloed," "Ark of the virgin," "holy birds" and "flight from Paradise."

Furthermore some of Walcott's images derive from Thomas. His line, "I was hero, the caves halloed" comes from Thomas' "I was huntsman and herdsman, the caves sang to my horn." And the pathetic fallacy of painting a bright sun-filled world to match his memory of childhood derives from the "green and golden" atmosphere of "Fern Hill." In spite of this debt to Thomas however, the theme of childhood as the period of beatitude is not as persistent in Walcott as it is in the work of the Welshman whose theme is persistently that of the doubleness of womb and tomb. The theme of isolation is more recurrent in Walcott, and in seeking to express his peculiar sense of his situation as a West Indian, he sought help in the writings of T.S. Eliot. We notice from the outset that Walcott's imitation of Eliot is not based on single poems so much as on a group of poems, more specifically the early Eliot of the 1917 and 1920 volumes which contain "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," "Preludes," "Portrait of a Lady" and "Gerontion." The typical speaker of these poems is a person traumatized by his first realization of an existence without essence and by his failure to identify with someone or something other than himself, his failure to surrender his separation. In "Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady" the speaker flaunts his erudition and culture and delights in the cleverness of his own phrasing. He refers to Hamlet, to "an atmosphere of Juliet's tomb," to the music of Chopin, and speaks such "cultured" lines as:

> --And so the conversation slips
> Among velleities and carefully caught regrets
> Through attenuated tones of violins
> Mingled with remote cornets.[7]

His tone is conversational, but avails itself of alliteration, of varied rhythmic effects and of rhyme.

The imagery of these early poems of Eliot's have become their best known feature, especially in what was considered then to be their insistent modernity. These are images drawn from modern urban living, designed to evoke an intensely low mimetic atmosphere: a world of teacups, cheap hotels, cigarettes, smells of beer and basement kitchens. Indeed "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" is composed of a string of these images. With self-conscious irony, the speaker of these poems points to the dislocation between his heroic aspirations and the non-heroic atmosphere in which he is caught and in which he wanders aimlessly.

Taken together, the early poems of Eliot form a genre which Walcott employs in some of his work in [illegible] effort to express how he felt about his island existence. The very first poem of his first major collection, In a Green Night, shows most clearly his debt to the genre. Adopting the convention of a fictionalized character speaking in the first person, the poet describes a quality of islandness, of being cut off from all except visiting tourists who only define the islander in terms of the pleasure they seek, their one-dimensional gaze serving to intensify the native's lack of self-identity. The speaker in Walcott emphasizes the casualness of the island existence, he is the eternal beachcomber looking out to sea yet knowing there is nothing beyond. There is something of the self-mockery noted in the early Eliot as this speaker talks about "the profound cigarette" and learns to "suffer in accurate iambics":

> I go, of course, through all the isolated acts
> Make a holiday of situations
> Straighten my tie and fix important jaws. (In a Green Night, p. 11)

Walcott's debt to Eliot reveals itself most clearly in the imagery. "The profound cigarette" has its possible precursor in Eliot's "Let us take the air in a tobacco trance" ("Portrait of a Lady"); "the turned doorhandle" is related to "Fraulein von Kulp/ Who turned in the hall, one hand on the door" ("Gerontion"); "the knife turning in the bowels" is reminiscent of "the last twist of the knife" ("Rhapsody on a Windy Night"); finally, Walcott's "straighten my tie" is related to Eliot's "My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin" ("Prufrock"). The generalized nature of the allusions, the fact that they are drawn from a number of poems, argues that what Walcott wants is not a formal model as much as a view of the world. Allusiveness is an important element in this view of life, erudition being a characteristic of the typical inhabitant of the landscape; and Walcott alludes not only to Eliot but to other writers as well, and in one instance, to a writer to whom Eliot alluded frequently. Here is the final stanza of the poem under discussion:

> Until from all I turn to think how
> In the middle of the journey through my life
> O how I came upon you, my
> Reluctant leopard of the slow eyes. (p. 11)

The allusion of course is to Dante, the opening line of whose Inferno is translated almost exactly in Walcott's "In the middle of the journey through my life." The image of the leopard which is again related to Dante and Eliot ("Ash Wednesday") presents a difficulty. In Dante, the gay leopard which the poet encounters represents self-indulgence or lust and is to be avoided. Walcott's tone is one of affection and welcome, as if the "you" addressed represents a way out of the casualness of island existence. The allusion to Dante, if caught, enriches the meaning of the line. A sexual relationship may be sinful to some but for the islander it is at least momentarily engrossing, a brief consolation.

The centrality of Eliot's genre to the early poetry of Walcott is confirmed by an examination of "A Careful Passion" (p. 43) whose theme of a dislocated relationship between a man and a woman is presented along the lines developed by Eliot in "Prufrock and "Portrait of a Lady." In these poems and in "the Waste Land" Eliot uses the failure of two "lovers" to communicate with each other as the symbol of human isolation, suggesting that the chasm between two human beings is beyond the power of language to bridge. This is why Prufrock is afraid that after he has struggled to express his deepest feelings, his female companion, "settling a pillow by her head," will nonchalantly reply:

> .....That is not what I meant at all.
> That is not it at all.[8]

In "The Waste Land," the man has given up on the possibility of being able to communicate, realizing not only the futility of language, but also the deeper truth that each person is imprisoned within himself.

The woman who does not share his profound despair finds his silence unbearable and reacts to it with a hysteria which only makes the separation more terrifying:

> "Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak
> "What are you thinking of? What thinking? What
> "I never know what you are thinking. Think." (p. 55)

Sexual relationships become in this context either a genteel game of chess played to pass the time or else a dull mechanical and ugly routine hastily enacted on a divan: in either case, it is passionless and the participants are committed to each other only by boredom and a desperate fear of loneliness.

Walcott's "A Careful Passion" with its oxymoronic title participates in these themes. It is a poem about separateness which, as in Eliot, uses the dislocation between lovers and the failure of language as the major symbols of that separateness. Walcott however swerves from Eliot in one important respect: he gives a positive value to sexuality even in this context of an absence of a lasting commitment. Indeed all the women in the early poetry of Walcott are the same woman, all perceived in terms of "the reluctant leopard," as agents who rescue the speaker temporarily from the total disengagement of the islander. To the question "What shall we ever do?" which is posed in "The Waste Land," Walcott's answer seems to be a temporary love affair, physical and wordless. "A Careful Passion" is particularly reminiscent of "Portrait of a Lady" where the woman, not sharing the man's despair, reaches pathetically for a relationship that transcends the casual; the tension of the poem coming from the clash between the woman's deep-felt effusions and the man's evasiveness, his deliberate superficiality which at the end of the poem gives way to the deep fear it was designed to conceal.

Walcott's poem is structured differently and is concerned with elucidation for the reader's benefit rather than with the growth of its characters: thus the man in the poem is no less or more convinced of the futility of personal relationships at the end than he is at the beginning whereas Eliot's character undergoes a change of attitude, and as for the woman in the West Indian poem she is as uncomprehending at the end as she is at the beginning. She wants a long romance but is satisfied with his false, cliché-ridden explanation of why they cannot have a more permanent relationship. In the first section of the poem, which covers the first two verse paragraphs, Walcott sets the scene: a man and a woman are sitting at a table at a tropical seaside sipping drinks. She is married though not to him, and in this respect they are not unlike the coupling flies she brushes off their table. It is when the woman speaks that Eliot's echoes rush in and provide a way of reading this poem. She says:

> Sometimes I wonder if you've lost your speech.

Immediately we are reminded of the hysterical woman in "The Waste Land" as we realize that the poem is concerned with apartness and the problem of communication, or at least partly so. A related theme is that of existential significance. In the next section of the poem, the speaker in profound nihilism sees himself as a dead carcass, but it is a truth which he cannot reveal to the woman who, he thinks, will not understand. Again we are reminded of Prufrock imagining himself as Lazarus come back from the dead to tell all, only to be slapped in the face by the woman's indifferent response:

> That is not what I meant at all.
> That is not it at all.

Further, he knows how precarious the relationship is — a fact symbolized by the adulterous nature of their affair and also by their sitting at "a small table by the harbour's edge." And it is in this second section that we find the closest approximation to actual lines from "Portrait of a Lady." Walcott's speaker having lied to the woman about why they cannot have a prolonged relationship, says to the reader:

> Better to lie, to swear some decent pledge,
> To resurrect the buried heart again;
> To twirl a glass and smile, as in pain,
> At a small table by the water's edge.

There is a great deal of Eliot in these lines; I will discuss only two major points. The first relates to the opposition established between a deep and terrible truth and superficial distractions by which we seek to divert our attention from the truth. The entire relationship between the speaker and the woman is precisely such a distraction, but even more so are the little details listed in the lines quoted above — sitting at a seaside, smiling and twirling a glass. Certainly the phrase "as in pain" is a reminder that the distraction is never total and the terrible truth persists through the barrier of triviality designed to keep it in check. A similar list of trivial distractions is found in "Portrait of a Lady":

> Let us take the air in a tobacco trance,
> Admire the monuments
> Discuss the late events
> Correct our watches by the public clocks.
> Then sit for half an hour and drink our bocks.[9]

Obviously, there is also a rhythmical resemblance here with Walcott's lines, a rhythm which is established by the periodic accumulation of phrases describing the various acts of distraction and culminating in the respective final lines with the description of a place to sit and drink, a refuge. In the final section of "A Careful Passion," Walcott differs from Eliot in celebrating the purely physical dimension of the relationship, seeing it as a worthy distraction.

It is clear that the early poetry of T.S. Eliot is central to Walcott's earlier efforts to present a vision of what life on the islands meant to him. In time he ceases to employ so obviously the genre of the cute talking youth caught in a hysterical sexual relationship, dropping much of the showy literariness, the terrible sense of casualness, the dislocated romance, the self-conscious youth. Yet there has remained in his work elements surviving even in his most recent uncollected poems which indicate an abiding debt to Eliot.[10]

Several of the later poems of Walcott employ the figure of the man left alone on an island as his symbol of the West Indian. "The Castaway," "Crusoe's Island," and "The Saddhu of Couva" are representative. They belong to and extend a tradition that derives from Eliot's "Gerontion," and its theme the "thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season."[11] These are poems in which Walcott emphasizes existential problems: faith and its possible substitutes, political action and its inevitable impurity, individual power or impotence versus social obligation, exile and the need to return. In arguing the continuity between these poems and "Gerontion" I shall emphasize not so much the metrical and rhythmical resemblances as a phanopoeic resonance resulting from a similarity of outlook. As with his initial vision, derived in part from Thomas, Walcott's later way of seeing his island and the world at large is also chosen and determined by his reading.

A reading of Walcott's "The Castaway" which focuses on its relationship with Eliot's poetry is obliged to overlook some other very interesting lines of pursuit. For instance, in discussing the first three lines of the poem:

> the starved eye devours the seascape for the morsel
> Of a sail.
>
> The horizon threads it infinitely,[12]

I am above all not going to be concerned with the sound of the lines — the alliteration on the /s/ sound in the first line or the partial rhyme of "morsel and "sail" —; nor with the rhythmic contrasts between the long twelve syllable first line and the short three syllable second line. English poetry has been alliterative from its very beginnings and slant rhymes have been employed since the time of Thomas Vaughan, while irregular lines have been with us since free verse became fashionable. Technical pursuits have therefore not very fruitful beyond making us aware of the poet's total immersion in the traditions of English poetry. More interesting questions are raised by the pictures the poet paints. The image of the "castaway," the solitary, marooned figure looking toward the horizon for a rescuing vessel is archetypal and recurs in many places in literature. Two writers are of special significance, Defoe whose Robinson Crusoe is implicitly present in this poem and explicitly so in others, and Eliot whose "Prufrock" and "Gerontion" are tacit models for these lines. Towards the end of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" the speaker imagines himself as an ineffectual old man:

> I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach
> I have heard the mermaids singing each to each.
>
> I do not think that they will sing to me.

And the character has much in common with Walcott's Castaway, who affects a similar suspicion of involvement and is both unhappy about and attached to his isolation. There are obvious differences; the sea is an ambivalent symbol in Walcott where it is more univocal in "Prufrock." In the West Indian poem it is as much the source of possible relief as the conveyor of unwanted company, intruders upon his island calm. On that more later.

I will jump three stanzas to consider further details in Walcott's presentation of his speaker.

> Pleasures of an old man:
> Morning, contemplative evacuation; considering
> The dried leaf, nature's plan.
>
> In the sun the dog's faeces
> Crusts, whitens like coral.
> We end in earth, from earth began
> In our entrails genesis.

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The heavily accented halting rhythm which so well suits to the contemplative mood of the speaker is reminiscent of the rhythm of some of Eliot's monologues. Consider for instance,

> ....There was a Birth, certainly,
> We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death
> But had thought they were different; this Birth was
> Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death our death.
> ("Journey of the Magi")

Also, there is some self mockery in the speaker's self portraiture. Among the important joys of his life is to sit mornings on the toilet seat, rather like Leopold Bloom, and ponder nature's cycle of decay, dessication and regeneration. Thus in his view to defecate is to create or to use the speaker's own impious words, "In our entrails genesis" where part of the meaning of the line relies on our invoking the Biblical associations of "genesis." The description of the dog's excrement reinforces this notion: the use of the explosive word, "crusts" as well as the active voice of that verb lends a living quality to the "faeces"; and when it is said to "whiten like coral" the poet is pointing to both its dried-out deadness ("whitens") as well as to its living regenerative quality ("coral"). This last word of course carries echoes of the line "Of his bones are corals made" from the song, "Full Fathom Five Thy Father Lies," from _The Tempest_, a song to which Eliot alludes in "The Waste Land."[13] Thus the poem is among other things an ironic version of one of Eliot's favorite themes, regeneration through death. Here it is more like regeneration through decomposition. An awareness of Eliot's concern with this subject intensifies the irreverence of Walcott's version, the confident defiance which is part of the Crusoe pose, the claim of self-sufficiency.

It could be argued by a black aesthetician of the separatist school that Walcott did not intend an allusion to the Bible in using the word "genesis," nor to Shakespeare in the word "coral." The argument is by now familiar, for we raised and answered it in discussing Redmond. The argument is an irrelevant one which in addition to falling foul of the intentional fallacy, fails to recognize that words are steeped in associations which defy intentions and that this fact is an important one to consider in any debate over a separate black aesthetic.

Walcott offers us a decaying atmosphere complete with fecal matter and an emphasis on dryness. The picture recalls Eliot's "Gerontion," the poem about an old man meditating upon his life in an atmosphere of faithlessness. Both Walcott and Eliot see human beings in terms of their feebleness and impotence, their essential separateness, and the spiritual vacuity of their world which is matched by its physical degeneracy. Walcott's poem deviates in major ways from Eliot's and I will approach this divergence via the diction of "the Castaway" which reveals a lot of suppressed violence and hints at the tension between the speaker's pose of feebleness or social impotence and his sense of personal potency, his belief that he has the resources to create his own world, to play Robinson Crusoe. In this he is very different from the speaker in "Gerontion" who sees himself as feeble, as "an old man driven by the Trades/To a sleepy corner," rendered aimless and ineffectual by his loss of belief. By way of contrast the castaway dwells first on certain kinds of external violence; initially on the violence of social intercourse which in his guise as the happy exile he seeks to eschew:

> Action is frenzy. I lie
> Sailing the ribbed shadow of palm
> Afraid lest my own footprints multiply.

Yet as he contemplates the solitary calmness of his surroundings he becomes aware of the ubiquitous violence which seems to be endemic in nature. He represents his revelation emblematically in the action of the surf as it shifts the sand and especially in the futile buzzing of the sandfly:

> Blowing sand, thin as smoke,
> bored, shifts its dunes.
> The surf tires of its castles like a child.
>
> The salt green vine with yellow trumpet-flower,
> A net, inches on nothing.
> Nothing the rage with which the sandfly's head is filled.
> (*The Castaway*, p. 9)

Against this futile rage, this purposeless activity, the castaway poses his own calm contemplativeness and the realization it brings him that he can in fact create his own world, that he is a Crusoe who can do anything or rather put his own interpretation and value on his actions. Thus he cracks a sea-louse and interprets that action as equivalent to making thunder split. This self mocking display and the perverse interpretation the castaway puts on his actions reminds one vaguely of Milton's Satan and his notion that the mind can convert hell into heaven; there is something equally desperate in the castaway's notion of grandeur, this desperate effort to

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convert loneliness to easeful calm and impotence to power.

It is in this spirit that the speaker abandons what he calls "dead metaphors," the structures by which he has previously understood himself and the world. Indeed, coming as the first poem in Walcott's second collection, this poem is like the preface to a volume whose major theme is the fashioning of a world, poems which in the poet's words perform "Adam's task of giving things their names."[14] The major symbol of what is rejected is the "wrecked ship" which stands for contact with the culture he is abandoning. The description of the ship is interesting from this point of view:

> a wrecked ship,
> Gnarled seawood clenched and white like a man's hand, (p. 11)

"White" suggests death; the castaway sees himself as rejecting a defunct culture, and the notion is reinforced by the wine bottle. However, in another edition of the poem, Walcott, feeling uncomfortable perhaps with the racial echoes of "white," replaced it with "nailed"[15] thereby introducing a specifically Christian image: the ship's nails remind him of the crucifixion and Christianity then becomes a part of the rejected culture.

Obviously then, "The Castaway" differs from "Gerontion" primarily in the protagonist's view of the decay as an opportunity for him to replace it with something new. Indeed in the light of this realization, the initial glances toward the horizon now appears to have been generated by the fear that someone will come to interfere with his regenerative isolation. The poem becomes an affirmation of the Crusoe myth. The defiance which in Lowell's "Skunk Hour" is located in the skunks is here made an attribute of the speaker who like Crusoe is going to design his own world.

In Truth and Method, Hans-Georg Gadamer wonders if it is possible for any historical situation to be imagined that has a closed horizon. He writes:

> Or is this a romantic reflection, a kind of Robinson Crusoe dream of the historical enlightenment, the fiction of an unattainable island, as artificial as Crusoe himself for the alleged primary phenomenon of the solus ipse? Just as the individual is never simply an individual, because he is always involved with others, so too the horizon that is supposed to enclose a culture is an abstraction. The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never utterly bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon.....
>
> It is not the historical consciousness which first sets the surrounding horizon in motion. But in it, this motion becomes aware of itself.[16]

This passage has both a particular and a general relevance to our discussion. One is struck by the precise similarity in the imagery of Walcott and Gadamer — Crusoe, the island and the horizon, and their implication for one's understanding of Walcott's poem. From Gadamer's point of view one would conclude that Walcott is in this poem describing a condition of being which is unattainable. Gadamer's historical argument applies equally to Walcott's pseudo-geographical instance. Walcott's "horizon" is not merely literal; like Gadamer's it represents the boundary of a culture, the line that separates the West Indies culturally from other parts of the world. The castaway West Indian is not completely sealed off by the horizon and his abandonment of "dead metaphors" is not total, for if it were Walcott would have to write in a language that only West

Indians could understand. The fact that he expresses a solipsistic outlook with the English language and its literary heritage is evidence of both his inescapable links with others and the inescapable fusion of his national horizon with other cultures.

Gadamer's remarks are also generally applicable to what I have called the nationalist position in black criticism. Such critics might reject Walcott's poem by claiming that in its adoption of the Gerontion genre and its failure to employ traditions which come out of black culture, it fails to address black history in a way that is relevant to black people. Stated in this way, the argument is a good one which is applicable to the work of Walcott. To what extent is Walcott illuminating a West Indian predicament as distinct from a more general human dilemma of the conflict between self and society? Above all, who are his audience? Yet in claiming or assuming a radical break between black writing and Western traditions as the fundamental grounds for their argument, the nationalists relegate themselves to the "unattainable island" described by Gadamer. The availability to both black and white writers of both English and French is proof of a fusion of horizons. It is not at all necessarily a consequence of this fusion that one of the two worlds has been completely subsumed by the other. In the poetry of Derek Walcott there is a preponderance of elements from beyond the horizon, and this is due obviously to the absence of local poetic traditions. Braithwaite's answer was to experiment with various kinds of black traditions including the blues and genres derived from the Akan people of West Africa.[17]

Walcott's poem "Crusoe's Island" opposes the poet who expresses a specifically West Indian dilemma and the one who borrows from an alien tradition. Here Walcott meditates on his situation and picks up several images from "The Castaway" — the Crusoe figure, the island, the shadow. It is a more personal poem than "The Castaway" and thus gives detailed evidence of Walcott's peculiar view of himself as a West Indian. The continuity with the Gerontion genre is clear as evidenced in these lines:

> Crazed by a racking sun,
> I stand near my life's noon.
> On parched, delirious sand
> My shadow lengthens.[18]

We find here the same idea expressed in "Gerontion" of a headlong flight from grace which the speaker is powerless to check, the same idea of a rush toward a meaningless death — meaningless because faith has been lost and life reduced to a "delirious" excursion from a blessed condition to mere extinction. Eliot's blessed condition is located in a supposedly prior time when in Matthew Arnold's words the sea of faith was full and when mankind lived close to God. Where does the West Indian locate his blessed time? The answer is in the third section, Faith, or the possession of it, becomes the blessed condition forever lost to the poet. His own faith, he tells us, was lost when both his father and son died; and thus the poem is among other things a wistful glance back at the Blessed state of childhood, a return to the theme of "Choc Bay." What has replaced faith for him is art, his skill as a craftsman with language. It is a gift that brings him moments of satisfying activity:

We swore
that we would never leave the island
until we had put down, in paint, in words
as palmists learn the network of a hand,
all of its sunken leaf-choked ravines,
every neglected, self-pitying inlet
muttering its brackish dialect. (Another Life, p. 52)

In "Crusoe's Island" the "poetic gift" offers no transcendental consolation, but only gratifying portraits of quotidian living:

Art is profane and pagan,
The most it has revealed
Is what a crippled Vulcan
Beat on Achilles' shield.

The theme of faith is introduced at the very opening of the poem with the image of a church bell ringing, and the rest of the poem is a meditation occasioned by the ringing bell. It is a beginning which recalls Gray's famous "Elegy." Walcott then offers a vision of the island as it might appear on a Sunday morning:

Red, corrugated iron
Roofs roar in the sun.
The wiry, ribbed air
Above earth's open kiln
Writhes like a child's vision
Of hell, but nearer, nearer.

The blazing cruelty of the tropical landscape is one reason why Walcott does not locate his blessed state there. We can argue that Walcott is here offering a religious view of the degenerate situation which he has in "The Castaway" presented the islands to be. In contrast to the cruelty of the tropical landscape and the grating assault it makes on the senses, there is the serenity of the English countryside:

Below, the simple plaid
Of Scarborough is spread
To a blue, perfect sky;
Our dome of hedonist philosophy.

There is an ambivalence in the description of the English scene: on the one hand, it is a peaceful contrast to fury of the tropical scene, on the other hand, it is "perfect," too self-satisfied and smug and can lull one into satisfaction with the superficial. By implication, there is something very chastening, very alive, in the Caribbean situation. The introduction of England brings up a recurrent theme in Walcott's work — the escape from and corollary return to the island. Thus the title poem of his volume, The Gulf, is about a journey across the separating ocean to the United States; some of the other poems in the collection record experiences which made a return necessary.[19] Similarly the title poem of the volume, Sea Grapes, is about the attraction of the sea to the islander as a source of adventure, as well as the counter claim of the island on his sense of responsibility.[20] In "Crusoe's Island" part of the criticism of the English scene is that in a profound sense it is "hedonist"; its calm and comfortable serenity gets in the way of a profound quest into the theme of responsibility, especially, the problem of what to do personally with poetic talent.

At this point the puzzle that animates the poem becomes clear. To what, outside himself, does a West Indian poet owe allegiance? His island is a painful reality, exile an excursion into futility, and a self-centered existence with art or alcohol is self-destructive, hedonist. How then must the islander live?

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Walcott offers a detailed account of the achievements of the islander:

> Upon this rock, the bearded hermit built
> His Eden:
> Goats, corn-crop, fort, parasol, garden,
> Bible for sabbath, all the joys
> But one
> Which sent him howling for a human voice.

In these lines Walcott uses specific details from Defoe's novel to define what has been achieved in the West Indies. It is a paradoxical set of details: while there is enough here to satisfy most human needs, the echo of Robinson Crusoe insists upon a sparse pioneer aspect. This is precisely the feeling that Walcott seeks to introduce, precisely how he views the West Indian. The same attitude is expressed more explicitly in his long autobiographical poem, Another Life:

> We were blest with a virginal, unpainted world
> with Adam's task of giving things their names
> with smooth white walls of clouds and villages.... (p. 152)

A profoundly satisfying aspect of being West Indian consists in this pioneer element, in the opportunity to bring a world into being where there was virtually nothing before. Ultimate satisfaction, however, eludes this pioneer, for one essential joy is missing: another human voice:

> Craftsman and Castaway
> All heaven in his head
> He saw his shadow pray
> Not for God's love, but human love instead.

It is this need to reach out to something outside of himself which sends the islander looking toward the horizon, looking for a means to leave the West Indies. The individual need for human contact corresponds to the national need to be in touch with the rest of the world. Both express the human desire for secular committment or adventure: to roam the seas like Odysseus who is invoked in "Sea Grapes."

The second section of the poem amplifies on the subject of exile, its promise and its limitations. It is an escape from the pressures of home, indeed it is more a question of mental attitude than actual physical self-removal and its greatest benefit, according to this poem, is not the opportunity it offers for contact with other human beings, rather it is a chance

> To let a salt sun scour
> The brain as harsh as coral
> To bathe like stones in the wind
> To be, like beast or natural object, pure.

Exile offers isolation, an escape from "action" and "frenzy," an opportunity to expose oneself passively to all the forces of the natural world, absorbing them all without the pressure to act.

Thus the island metaphor is ambivalent and describes two modes of human being: calm contemplation and active creation. Neither mode is permanently satisfying and human life is a continual movement from one to the other, from yogi to commissar. In the specific instance evoked in "Crusoe's Island," the tranquility of exile — one of the island modes — is shattered by the churchbell and the memories it brings of another mode of being, a time when he had faith.

Walcott has been accused by some readers of converting the West Indian situation into symbols of more general human predicaments.[21] Indeed since the dilemmas reflected on in his poetry do not seem peculiarly West Indian, some readers raise the question whether he is in any way a West Indian poet. Yet his themes of exile and return, freedom and responsibility, art and religion, loneliness and frenzy are in fact profoundly West Indian. The sense of having been exiled from the rest of the world is central to the West Indian experience. It is this feeling which compels the islander to be constantly looking to the horizon, yearning to rejoin the rest of the world for which he feels an insatiable nostalgia. Thus while loneliness may be a general human condition, the rootless insularity of the West Indian makes him more than usually lonely. The same is true for that feeling of homelessness which leads to exile: others may feel it too, but for the West Indian it is more than a feeling, it is a fact of history. If the island on which he finds himself is not his home, then the need to venture forth is greater than that of others. Freedom is there a dilemma. As Walcott shows in "The Castaway," it is a feeling of total disengagement which is both the mark of being cut off and also the grounds on which to stand.

The dilemma of freedom thus contains both a characteristic West Indian viewpoint and a link to other traditions, especially to twentieth century existentialist literature. The realization of the dilemma of freedom was forced upon the West Indian when as an uprooted slave laboring for the profit of landowners who lived in England he realized that nothing bound him to his country or master except fear of pain. Once the abolition of slavery removed this fear he found himself terrifyingly free. The wilful desire to play God and make his own world which Walcott illuminates is thus a characteristic West Indian pose. The isolation which results from the transcendental freedom is paradoxical in nature: it is the common identity of the West Indian and yet the grounds of a social bond. And this paradox is explored by Walcott in several poems including "Nearing La Guaira" and "A Careful Passion."[22]

If there is one word which sums up the condition here described it is that word which is so overused in our time, "alienation." The West Indian whose labor has historically enriched someone else and currently enriches a neo-colonial bourgeoisie, who finds himself saddled with a transcendental freedom, who is placed in an uncharted terrain whose previous history has been wiped out and to which he feels no allegiance, such a person must daily confront the deepest questions of human existence. And it is for this reason that Eliot proved so permanently relevant to Walcott's vision of the West Indies; he seemed to be engaging the very issues which the West Indian confronted; he too spoke about alienation, about people separated from their destiny, about homelessness.

Thus, while Crusoe represents one aspect of the West Indian, namely, the castaway as builder, Gerontion represents another, opposite, aspect: the castaway as a contemplative man tortured by

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his inability to see his destiny which seems to be permanently beyond the horizon. In "Crusoe's Island" these two aspects of the Caribbean are brought together and shown to be perpetually alternating: Crusoe's energy necessitates a retreat; Gerontion's reflectiveness reveals his impotence and the need to return to more positive action. It is not surprising in the light of this poem that a novel about the West Indies is entitled The Children of Sisyphus.[23]

An important theme in both Eliot and Walcott is loss of faith. Gerontion's landscape symbolizes the post-lapsarian condition of alienation from God, but it is an image which proves useful to Walcott whose island, fired by the Sunday sun, is oppressive to him, but is a congenial realm of "spire, harvest and marigold" to the children who have faith. For the West Indian, childhood is the happy condition: to grow up is to come to a painful realization of his alienated condition. It is a familiar theme and one about which Walcott himself has previously written. But here the religious dimension is important in helping define the limited nature of the fulfilment that comes from the practice of the poetic craft, it is crucial for suggesting that the West Indian like Eliot's character inevitably bypasses his essence. Thus Eliot's poem, far from coming between Walcott and his subject, provides him with a view of human life which he found applicable to the Caribbean situation. Later in the conclusion, I reemphasize the abiding relevance of the Gerontion genre in the work of Walcott by demonstrating its presence in his

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most recent writing, while showing at the same time Walcott's effort to domesticate his model.

Walcott like Eliot is a political conservative made uneasy by the radical freedom of his situation; he yearns for the certainties of the past instead of rejoicing in the opportunities opened up by this freedom. His is a religious sensibility made unhappy by mankind's march away from God. This conservative strain in his writing is in part responsible for his unpopularity with some black readers. Walcott is not always conservative, however. His long poem Another Life welcomes the freedom of the West Indies and delights in the opportunity offered to him and others like him to build everything anew, throwing out the dead metaphors of Europe. This radical aspect of his disposition is represented by Crusoe, with Gerontion standing for the conservative impulse. Certainly both of these models are from Western literature, but that too is part of the West Indian dilemma: the unavailability of local traditions for describing his situation. In order to be able to speak at all, the islander must use the language of Europe (or even less attainably of Africa or India) adapting it to speak for him.

Perhaps more than any other black poet, Walcott shows that some themes and genres of English literature can be made to speak about other climes and epochs, that a feeble old man from the pages of the Anglo-Catholic T.S. Eliot can be the prototype of a bewildered old East Indian dying in the West Indies. If, as I have tried to argue, what he has to say of the Caribbean is profound, then it is unfortunate if black people should reject his writing for not showing enough concern with racial and national themes. This hasty "political" rejection fails to see that far from failing to confront the dilemmas of the West Indian, Walcott illuminates them by laying bare their mythic outlines.

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

[1] See Louis James, ed., The Islands in Between (London: OUP, 1968).

[2] See V.S. Naipaul, The Middle Passage (London: Andre Deutsch, 1962).

[3] R.J. Owens, "West Indian Poetry," Caribbean Quarterly, VII, Dec. 1961, p. 121.

[4] Derek Walcott, "Elegy," In a Green Night (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962), p. 13.

[5] Dylan Thomas, "A Refusal to Mourn the Death by Fire of a Child in London" in The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry, p. 909.

[6] The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry, p. 911.

[7] T.S. Eliot, "Portrait of a Lady," Selected Poems (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1934), p. 17.

[8] Eliot, "Prufrock," Selected Poems, p. 14.

[9] Eliot, p. 18.

[10] I refer to his poem "The Saddhu of Couva," American Poetry Review, vol. 7, no. 3, May/June 1978, p. 6.

[11] Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour," Life Studies and For the Union Dead (New York: The Noonday Press), p. 89, can be included in this group of poems; so also can Walcott's "Crusoe's Journal."

[12] Walcott, "The Castaway," The Castaway (London: Jonathan Cape, 1965), p. 9.

[13] Eliot, p. 55.

[14] Walcott, Another Life (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), p. 152.

[15] Walcott, Selected Poems (New York: Farrar, Straus & Co., 1964), p. 59.

[16] Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method (1900, New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 271.

[17] See Edward Braithwaite, Arrivants (London: Penguin, 1972)

[18] Walcott, The Castaway, p. 54.

[19] Walcott, The Gulf (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971)

[20] Walcott, Sea Grapes (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976)

[21] See Alice Walker's article on Walcott in Modern Black Writing, ed., Michael Popkin (New York: Frederick Ungar Co., 1978), p. 240.

[22] Both poems are in In a Green Night.

[23] Orlando Patterson, Children of Sisyphus (London: New Authors, 1964).

CHAPTER FOUR

EUGENE REDMOND: AN OUTSIDER'S APPROACH

Eugene Redmond, a young black American poet, offers in his work a challenging opportunity for investigating some of the hidden connections between contemporary Afro-American poetry and some traditions of Anglo-American literature. In the first place, it is important for a meaningful discussion that the poet chosen should not be one who is obviously in the "mainstream": this consideration not only excludes such poets as Robert Hayden and Melvin Tolson or the earlier Gwendolyn Brooks, who display their erudition in the general Western intellectual traditions, but it affects practically every black poet from Phyllis Wheatley and her heroic couplets and Claude McKay and his sonnets until Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960's - with Langston Hughes and a few others, as outstanding exceptions. Redmond is a post-Black Arts Movement writer. He is aware of and participates in the intellectual and pyschological changes that have affected black people in America since the sixties. At the same time, some of his poems have features that provide generic links with some Western traditions.

The poet has to display what Stephen Henderson calls "saturation" in the culture of black people in America. Though Henderson uses saturation as a criterion of literary judgment, it is not easily usable in that way from my comparatist and cross-cultural perspective.

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For Henderson, saturation describes that specifically cultural quality in the literary work which expresses "fidelity to the observed and intuited truth of the black experience" (p. 62). Thus, the saturation in Etheridge Knight's folk poem about a legendary black character called Shine who alone survived the sinking of the Titanic is the recognition by black readers that the poem embodies some of their sentiments and that there is something very true about Knight's character.[1] Different but still displaying saturation is Mari Evans' poem of love and reproach, "Where Have You Gone?" which is cited by Henderson himself as expressing the "despair which is an important truth about a black woman's existence":

Where have you gone
With your confident
Walk your
Crooked smile....[2]

Redmond is the recipient of many years of formal education. While this would seem to set him apart from the masses of people for whom he wants to write, it nevertheless makes him typical of the recent generation of black writers for whom a college education is not a rare experience. And while much has been written about the ways in which black writers adopt and adapt elements from the folk traditions of black people[3], a popular example being Langston Hughes' adaptation of the blues in some of his poems, not enough attention has been paid to the problem of what happens to the poet's erudition in the effort to re-enter the folk traditions. In a sense, the problem is similar to the one we encountered in considering Senghor and modern African writers, namely, that the contact with Europe alters their conciousness in a way that makes it impossible for them to write in a purely naive mode. Thus, while I will not attempt to write another treatise on the folk traditions of modern black poetry, a task for which I am profoundly unqualified, I will, however, attempt to investigate by examining some of Eugene Redmond's poems, the ways in which his formal education, his immersion in the mainstream, makes his poetry accessible to the outsider in ways which he may not have intended. I find in some of his poems a "thickness" which allows for several layers of interpretation including, certainly, those based on saturation.

One layer is to approach the poem via an aesthetic which sees particular social and cultural referents as symbols or metaphors for more general human situations. The problem I am formulating has been eloquently expressed in verse by Amiri Baraka in his poem, "Numbers, Letters," in which a voice says:

> .... Say it straight to be
> understood straight, put it flat and real
> in the street where the sun comes and the
> moon comes and the cold wind in winter
> waters you eyes. Say what you mean, dig
> it out, put it down, and be strong
> about it.[4]

One way of reading these lines is as an expression of a tension between the demand for everyday clarity made on the poet by his audience of common folk and his own impulse to be erudite, ornate, and difficult. Baraka himself at one time included the "difficult" in this theory of aesthetics:

> Poetry aims at difficult meanings. Meanings not already catered to. Poetry aims at reviving, say, a sense of meaning, or meaningful possibility and ubiquitousness.[5]

This admission of the "difficult" into his theory of poetry means that for Baraka at least certain kinds of black poems will express

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meanings that do not rely solely on saturation. Still the black community is the subject matter upon which poetry is to reflect deeply. In order to generate meanings different from those already catered to, the language of poetry employs devices which differentiate it from transcribed street talk. Thus the verses quoted above from Baraka (in spite of the appeal made by the speaker for plain talk) differ substantially from the everyday language blacks do use. First is the repetition of the word "straight" in the first and second of the quoted lines and, of the word, "comes"; then the repetition with variation of "dig it out, put it down." Next is the rhythm which is much more studied and contains more symmetry in the distribution of stresses than is found in normal speech except when as often happens blacks become self-consciously playful in their use of language. Finally, the "description" of the street "where the sun comes..." is radically different from the account one would find in ordinary parlance. To begin with, at this point in the passage we find the greatest regularity in rhythm which suggests the regular cycle of alternating day and night and of the seasons. Second, Baraka turns the street into what in a previous chapter I have called a modern poetic metaphor for a deferred meaning by describing the street as the location of the sun and the moon, and as the playground of the seasons. This description is an apt example of what Baraka means by a difficult meaning. We could say that the street becomes a metaphor or symbol for the eternal or cyclical variety of life, its joy and misery, but when we have said this, we know we have hardly exhausted the possibilities of the image. The street which is normally the hangout of poor urban blacks is in this poem given an unusual meaning. What the poem makes clear is that to be able to give significance to life, the poet needs to deviate from a mere recording of it, ought to do more than merely "put it flat."

In their efforts to transform life into meaning, contemporary black poets have not necessarily had to rely on techniques acquired from the mainstream. In the lines quoted above neither the repetition, nor the deliberate exploitation of cadence, nor the use of street as metaphor is obviously adopted from white poetic usage. Repetition, as illustrated before, is found in most oral poetry, and so is musicality. Nevertheless, it needs to be emphasized that in poetry which transcends literalness the metaphors are often intransitive and capable of generating a multiplicity of impressions or meanings.

This approach, although applicable only to certain kinds of poems, allows for interpretations other than those based on familiarity with a poet's specific culture. Thickness in a poem would consist among other things in its capacity to speak about some things other than the particulars mentioned. Thus poetry can offer, in its cognitive import, characters and situations which are more than the social types found in novels. Critics who want literature to serve a didactic and reformist function tend to emphasize social typicality as literature's main generalizing function. But to use a famous example, while it is true that the Duke of Ferrara in Browning's poem exemplifies and illuminates the exaggerated sense of family honor and the cruel abuse of power which characterized the aristocracy of a certain place and time (social type), he also exemplifies a more general type of humanity; the stiff, the proud, and the formal.

If we place the lines from Baraka in the context of the poem, we obtain a more accurate perspective of the dialectics between the particulars of black life (Henderson's saturation) and their function as poetic devices contributing to the meaning-giving function. The complete verse paragraph reads thus:

> If you're not home, where
> are you? Where'd you go? What
> were you doing when gone? When
> you come back, better make it good.
> What was you doing down there, freakin' off
> with white women, hangin' out
> with Queens, say it right to be
> understood straight, put it flat and real
> in the street where the sun comes and the
> moon comes and the cold wind in winter
> waters your eyes. Say what you mean, dig
> it out put it down, and be strong
> about it.[6]

Although other readings are possible, the situation here could be one of the black woman deploring the waywardness of her man; indeed a very similar situation to the one which Mari Evans employs as the basis of the poem, "Where Have You Gone." Especially, the reader ought to be aware of the charged sexual tensions that are popularly believed to prevail between black men and white women and the black woman's response to that problem - tensions which provide a major theme for Baraka's earlier dramas, Dutchman and The Slave. The second level of black life is the language which in its colloquialism and its use of idioms such as "freakin' off," "dig it out," "what was you doing," "hangin' out," and "Queens" which is here used to mean "homosexuals" intensifies the blackness of the concrete situation, the illusion of a real black woman complaining to her man, which is indeed an important part of the poem's meaning, the experiential basis which is then made to radiate a difficult meaning. Baraka's shift from "What were you doing...?" (line 3) to "What was you doing...?" (line 5) points to another function of black speech. Clearly, the culturally more specific usage suggests more intense feeling on the speaker's part, a case of reverting to the vernacular in a moment of extreme excitement or agitation. Black idiom functions here not only to define the poem's social content, but structurally as an emphatic variation on a more general colloquial register.

What kinds of meanings do we derive from Baraka's particular presentation of the situation? First of all, his pauses suggest extreme urgency of the questions posed by the speaker:

> If you are not home, where
> are you? Where'd you go? What
> were you doing...

The rhythm of the lines themselves suggest a crisis whose dimensions are existential and transcend the domestic problem which is "realistically" portrayed. But even more important in bringing significance is the evocation of the street as the locus of life. It becomes clear that this confrontation between this black woman and her man is meant to be understood, at least from her perspective, as a conflict between spontaneous, solid and sensuous response to life represented by the woman and an intellectualized, cautious, and to her mind empty or impersonal response represented by the man. She is strong because of the basic simplicity of her attitude. He appears weak because he is more aware of the multiplicity of indefinable components that make up an individual and which render futile (for him) any description of their relationship in simple terms. A New Critic would argue that the situation evoked thus becomes a concrete universal, the feuding lovers are instances of a recurring confrontation between two modes of apprehension: the spontaneous or instinctive and the reflective; and that validity as poetry resides in the way in which the universal ideas emerge naturally from the poet's presentation of the particular situation.[6] It is clear that such a position, far from ignoring the black particularities, sees them as crucial in the making of a rich poem. However, this position - which is essentially my position - also says emphatically that the black experience treated poetically becomes a metaphor whose meaning is more generally available. New Critics have not shown great interest in black poetry, and I am not so much appealing to them for more sensitivity as appropriating one of their central tenets for the discussion of some black poetry.

There is no question that this point of view is profoundly antithetical to the spirit of a major section of both of black poetry and black criticism in the sixties, but the problem of the antithesis thus posed is not as real as it would first appear. Highly visible aspects of black American literature of the sixties are emphases upon the elevation of black consciousness and upon militancy. Some poems seek to stir their audience to a realization of the beauty of blackness; some urge them to rise and take up arms in the fight against white. Larry Neal may not have been quite so explicit in his "Afterward" to Black Fire:

> We must make literature move people to a deeper understanding of what this thing is all about, be a kind of priest, a black magician, working juju with the word in the world.[8]

But Baraka's message is unambiguous in his poem, "Black Art."

> ......We want poems
> like fists beating niggers out of Jocks
> or dagger poems in the slimy bellies
> of the owner-jews. Black poems to
> smear on girdlemamma mulatto bitches
> whose brains are red jelly stuck
> between 'lizabeth taylor's toes. Stinking
> Whores! We want "poems that kill."[9]

In angry invective, Baraka is here calling for the sheerest propaganda as distinct from the poetry of difficult meanings which he had described a few years earlier. He wants poetry to promote the revolutionary cause. Thus the declamatory tone which seeks to appeal to or even encourage participation by a mass audience; the public themes usually calling the reader to take up arms.

Although he was first published in the sixties and therefore participates in the consciousness of that hectic decade,[10] Redmond is really a poet of the seventies. He is especially appropriate for this inquiry because while being heir to that repudiation of the mainstream which became so pronounced in some critical thought of the sixties, most of his work is done in a more tranquil era. His poem, "Angel of Mercy," which is about the black revolutionary intellectual, Angela Davis, is a simple poem which belongs almost entirely to the devlamatory black tradition. While this style had its origins in the sermon, it became revalidated in the sixties. The poem functions primarily as a torrent of sounds which suggest emotions ranging from exasperation, pain, anger, fierce militancy, and culminating in consolation.

The poem begins thus:

Trials! Trials!
Another trial!
Another trial in the trek toward Sun-Center
Towards Sun-Song and Son-Song and Songhay
Towards yestermorrow.[11]

The two emphatic stresses of the first line as well as the repetition suggest exasperation - a mood which is emphasized in the longer second line which, nevertheless, contains, like the first, two stresses as well as repeats the word trial, in all its ambiguity of meaning. The third line picks up the words of the second line and expands them, first of all playing on the /t/ sound, but also by introducing the suggestion that Angela Davis' trials - literally the court trials but certainly also the hardships - are unavoidable stumbling blocks on the journey towards happier times. Line four then builds up on the sound/image unit which suggests this happier state, again employing alliteration and larger repetitions as with "Song" as well as slight variations in sound as in "Sun," "Son," "Song." The play on this particular sequence culminates in "Songhay," one of the ancient empires of the Sudanese West Africa and a symbol of the happier times towards which Angela Davis is painfully moving. Also, the "Sun," "Son," "Song," word-play contains a resonance to Vietnam names which is amplified later in the poem in the mention of "pentagods" and "napalm." The final line of the first verse paragraph again links up with the others through the repetition of "towards" and offers another suggestion in "yestermorrow" of that happier condition toward which blacks are struggling, a condition they knew in the past and will know again in the future. Redmond's manner of structuring the musicality of the poem is similar to John Coltrane's device of working from two pedal points, two tones half a step apart, out of which he builds the entire tune. Redmond too chooses "t" and "s," contiguous in the alphabet, and builds a stanza based on them.

There is no need to engage in a more detailed exploration of the poem since most of the major devices are already exemplified in the stanza quoted above. It is a highly rhetorical poem which depends almost entirely on rhythm and sound effects to generate emotion at a very high pitch. And its success depends partly on the availability of an audience already committed to the cause of black liberation, or at least willing, in order to experience the poem, to accept hypothetically that the political position taken by the poem is a self evident truth. In this respect, another technique which is obviously imitative of oral traditions is the listing of names in a manner reminiscent of the litany of praise names found in the traditional panegyric. Thus Redmond writes:

> *African winds/words call and caucus your co-queens:*
> *Shango's wives*
> *Sojourner Truth*
> *Harriet Tubman*
> *Mary Bethune*
> *Katherine Dunham*
> *Aretha Franklin*

The reciting of these names - each of which carries two primary stresses - builds up into a charged crescendo which explodes in the next line. Further, these lines are italicized to indicate a shift to a different and more musical rhythm and are patterned after the jazz improvisational method of repetition with elaboration and substitution. The next line goes:

Trials! Trials! One more river to Cross!

The line of course contains a quotation from the spirituals or rather from a set of spirituals which make references to "One more river to Cross" or "To the river, Jordan, being muddy and cold" or "to all my trials." Angela Davis' trial is thus another in the unending career of trials which has been the history of blacks in America. And in making this reference to the spirituals, Redmond exemplifies a feature which Henderson underlines as a major "structural" characteristic of black poetry, the use of black music as a reference.

It would appear then that this poem is solidly black owing nothing to mainstream traditions. It confirms both from the point of view of theme (liberation) and structure (progression by alliteration and highly declamatory rhythms) Redmond's debt to the sixties. And thus far, I have endeavored to read his poem as a student of Henderson might, guided by the first two of his categories and invoking what I know of Afro-American culture. Still, I do not have access to the saturation which would enable me to grasp Henderson's "observed and intuited truths" in this poem. I obtain my "truths" in yet another way.

The poem's use of Christian imagery offers another access to an outsider who may compare it with others of that kind, and make useful observations about it. The Bible is a major source for a great many spirituals; and a poem which, like this one, employs reference to the spirituals as a structural device links up thereby with Judeo-Christian traditions. The notion of one more river to cross refers to the escape of the Jews from Egypt and the image of one more trial relates to the story of Job: Angela Davis is in this poem a version of both Moses and Job. Such an interpretation is available to anyone with a popular knowledge of the Bible, making the poem accessible to a wider audience. Another Biblical image of this popular variety is in the line:

No more crosses to bear!

A more specific Christian reference is found in the line:

Forgive them that deny and decry. Pray later for those sinners.

The first part of the line is faintly reminiscent of "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," but it is with the second part that I am more concerned. "Pray for us sinners now," is a part of the Ave Maria, the Roman Catholic prayer to the mother of Jesus. Redmond's "*Pray later for those sinners*," appropriates the prayer in the mode of parody: "us" in the prayer becomes "those" in the poem; "now" becomes "later," slang for "never." The allusion makes Angela Davis a version of the Holy Mother and is a detail in her poetic canonization; thus unless the allusion is detected, part of the function of the line is lost to the reader.

All this is not to argue that "Angel of Mercy" is a Christian poem in the way some of John Donne's or George Herbert's are, any more than one would argue that Eliot's are merely imitations of theirs. Redmond is not concerned in this poem with the raptures and agonies of faith and except for the one allusion to the Ave Maria, the Bible only supplies, by way of the spirituals, a few stock images which convert the subject of the poem into a militant popular saint. Certainly "Angel of Mercy" is a black poem which sees

Angela Davis both as suffering for her people, the blacks of America, but in seeking to represent Ms. Davis as long-suffering, as a liberator and woman of superhuman sanctity, the poet employs the figures of Job, Moses, and the Virgin Mary respectively. By thus putting his poem in a Christian tradition, he permits access to a wider audience.

This opening up is all the more remarkable because of the popular nature of the poem, Indeed one reason why the Christian references are so summarily treated is that Redmond is in this poem not really seeking after difficult meanings. His poem is a modern folk poem which takes a popular cause and casts it in "song" for the enjoyment of a specific public. In this respect also it exemplifies a major trend of the sixties, the age of mass poetry among American blacks.

Redmond's poem on the death of his friend, the black poet Henry Dumas, is a more rewarding source for investigating the main issue of this chapter.[12] The subject matter suggests a genre, i.e., a conventional function of language which serves as a norm or guide to the reader. One expects an elegy. Now while the conventions of the English (mainstream) elegy are fairly well established, the outlines of a black elegy are less clearly defined. The death of Malcolm X was the occasion of many poetic tributes but it is difficult to extract a set of recurring conventions which can be said to constitute the black elegy, so diverse are the styles.[13] A difficulty in reading Redmond's elegy, then, is finding the structures that make for coherence, which give organization to the

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emotions and ideas of the poem. The attempt to approach this poem by way of the Western elegy appears initially to be futile. Redmond appears to be merely chronicling the events of the day and the relevance of much of the details to the elegaic mode is difficult to ascertain. For instance, this detail from the first part entitled "Flight to New York" is puzzling:

> The stewardess smiles at the passenger sitting
> Alone in the rear: "Pretty good landing in the rain,
>   wasn't it?"
> She's a company girl, the poet muses - a robot
>   with nice legs.
> Parts and pieces of the painful puzzle fall together
>   on the ground.

Granted that the "painful puzzle" is the common elegaic one of why Lycidas or Adonis or, in this case, Henry Dumas should die instead of another, it is difficult to see what role the air stewardess plays in the presentation of the question. However, the speed, the danger of a journey by airplane provides perspectives on the problem: in our age the possibility of death (symbolized by the air journey with the stewardess playing the role of Charon, the ferryman of the dead) is constantly with us and this realization is one way of accepting a friend's sudden and pointless death. But also the journey by airplane can be read as representing a separation of the above (the living or the just) from the below (the dead, the somehow guilty, among them Henry Dumas who was killed underground in the subway). This interpretation gives greater poignancy to the puzzle: why should Redmond be above and Dumas below except by the sheerest chance?

These questions are enough to show that Redmond's poem seeks to be deeply meditative, seeks to ponder the question of why and to provide a possible consolation. Such questions are not the concern either of Gwendolyn Brooks or Carolyn Rodgers in their tributes to Malcolm X - which is not to say that those poems are inferior. But the concern with these questions is the first real resonance to elegaic convention. I must make it clear that I am not arguing that Redmond necessarily learned to ask these questions by reading "Lycidas," "Adonis," or "In Memoriam." The question of how to understand the death of a good man, especially if he is young, is one that anybody may raise. The problem of how to console oneself and others in the face of a meaningless death is one that confronts many people. Possibly, Redmond's poem speaks most intimately to those who knew Dumas or who know what it means to be shot down gratuitously by a policeman. But for the outsider, the real question is what are the conventions by which the poet poses and answers these elegaic problems in a literary text? What in the text makes the problem of Dumas' death a real, moving experience even for black people in Africa who do not know Dumas? That the poet did not have Africans in mind is no reason why an African may not attempt to read this poem.

Another problem which engages the elegaic poet is the role of nature in the obsequies. How is the world affected by the momentous death? In the traditional Western elegy, all nature joins in the mourning, as shown in lines (37-49) from "Lycidas":

> Thee, shepherd, thee the woods and desert caves,
> With wild thyme and the gadding vine o'ergrown,
> And all their echoes mourn.

> The willows and the hazel copses green
> Shall now no more be seen,
> Fanning their joyous leaves to thy soft lays
> ....[14]

And it is interesting to observe that Redmond offers a similar vision:

> Rain,
> Earlier in East St. Louis and now in New York
> The skies continue to mourn for the fallen poet and warrior,
> Priest and prophet.

The argument that Redmond may merely be recording a real event while Milton is painting an artificial instance of the pathetic fallacy is inadequate. Many things presumably happened on the day that Dumas was buried, the fact that Redmond chose the rain to include in his poem makes it in that sense artificial, and shows the poet in this instance to be employing a specific literary convention which has exact parallels in the "mainstream." There are, however, interesting observations to be made about Redmond's version of this convention. Milton elaborates the point giving his lines a sensuous fullness and a ceremonial quality befitting his theme:

> As killing as the canker to the rose,
> Or taint-worm to the weanling herds that graze,
> Or frost to flowers that their gay wardrobe wear,
> When first the white thorn blows,
> Such, Lycidas, thy loss to Shepherds ear.

An interesting deviation is found in Auden's poem, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" where the poet presents nature not as participating in the funeral, but as pursuing its own unfeeling course:

> Far from his illness
> The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,
> The present river was untempted by the fashionable quays."[15]

Auden here offers again the view of suffering that he gives in another of his poems, "Musée des Beaux Arts" in which he claims that suffering usually takes place,

> While someone else is eating, or opening a window,
> or just walking dully along.[16]

By including such a view of nature in his elegy on Yeats, Auden is deliberately going against the conventional elegaic tradition as exemplified in "Lycidas" for instance, consciously defying a convention that he found too artificial and totally out of sympathy with his own feelings in the matter. For him the real pathos of Yeats' death is the overwhelming indifference of the natural and social worlds. A person's greatest triumph is if his or her death makes the tiniest dent on the unruffled surface of quotidian indifference:

> But in the importance and noise of tomorrow
> When the brokers are roaring like beasts on the floor of the Bourse,
> And the poor have the sufferings to which they are fairly accustomed,
> And each in his cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom,
> A few thousand will think of this day
> As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual.

Thus even though Auden deviates from the conventional position, he still participates in it, and the impact of Yeats' death on nature and society is a major theme of his poem, occupying the whole of the first section, even if he thinks the impact of the death on nature is nil and on society unmomentous.

Redmond's treatment of this theme is very brief; he does not elaborate it for its fuller affective and philosophical potential. It is as if for him the real pathos of Henry Dumas' death is not in the indifference of nature, but in the cruelty and callowness of society:

> Again talk: "They're slaughtering our boys in Vietnam."
> the middleage lady
> Quipped: "This graveyard will be filled up soon."
> A bus carrying the Army Honor Guard joined us
> at the entrance to the cemetery.
>
> The guard gave a trifling, sloppy salute to the fallen poet
> Who had served his country.

American society is seen as hostile or at best casual in its concern at the death of the young black poet who had served in the Air Force and had been shot down by a policeman. The honor guard will only accord a casual, token salute; and the Vietnam war is seen as a plot by America to kill off black youth. Yet there is no tension in the poet's presentation of this frightening and sad situation. The intended indignation will only be aroused in a reader who already is angry at this and other instances of racism and police brutality; the emotion felt will not be different from that aroused by a newspaper report for it is an emotion imported into the text rather than one which is part of the meaning of the text. In short, this seeks to be an insider's poem. The solidarity of community which the poet shares with his audience renders unnecessary any effort to "objectify" the poem's feelings. In contrast, the impact of the following lines and the sad truth they convey about individual life do not depend on a prior acquaintance with Yeats:

> A few thousand will think of this day
> As one thinks of a day on which one did something
> slightly unusual.

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This is partly because Auden addresses an unknown audience and must therefore find "objective correlatives" for his poem's feelings.

The most important link of all between this poem and an elegy like "Lycidas" is the role of Christianity and the exploration of other sources of consolation. In the traditional Christian elegy there is a reversal from grief to calm when the poet realizes that death is the entry to a more blessed life ("Lycidas" lines 165-185). Redmond's poem contains a fully elaborated position on the role of Christianity. The poem reverses the Christian conventional attitude toward afterlife as Auden reversed the attitude toward nature. The Christian position on death is repudiated through the figure of the preacher. When he delivers the eulogy at the funeral, his faith is undermined by the circumstances of Dumas' death, and he feels unable to offer the ultimate consolation of Heaven:

> The radiant Black man of cloth
> Was unpretentious; he broke with tradition - promising
> No alternatives to death.
> Seemingly unaware of heaven or hell, he suggested simply
>   "a last resting place."

Here Redmond like Milton and Tennyson employs the Christian myth of Heaven as part of the elegaic vocabulary. Where Milton uses the myth as a source of hope, however, Redmond gives it no value as consolation. He prefers to locate consolation in the figures of the dead poet's children:

> The skies lifted their hung heads
> Mrs. Dumas smiled finally and played with her sons,
> David and Michael.
> *The boys, cast in the same physical mold as their father*
> *Were impeccably dressed.*

Here as elsewhere the poem seems rather over-explicit. Redmond's details do not seem to contribute meaningfully to the argument or the emotions of the poem. For instance, the detail of the children being impeccably dressed seems to have no relevance to any of the major concerns of the poem. It is relevant of course that the widow plays with her children, and the reader who approaches this poem via the elegy will compare this consolation with the repudiated Christian one. Is the reader to read immortality in the detail that the boys are "cast in the same physical mold as their father"? Are the children to be seen as hope for the future? The ones who will correct today's wrong? A number of details support a reading of the last two lines as a statement of "immortality." The italics highlight the image giving it greater significance. The children are of the same physical mold as their father; they constitute his afterlife. Even the children's impeccable dress may indicate a new generation of blacks equipped to hold their own in tomorrow's America. However, this seemingly incongruous detail suggests an alternative reading: do the smartly dressed children represent immortality or hope for the future? Or are they merely the consoling distractions of a widow in a world without ultimate consolation for bereavement? This reading takes the poem's apparent disregard for thematic relevance as a structural device aimed at suggesting an incoherent world.

The pursuit of these intertextual links throws Redmond's real emphases into greater relief. And since the elegaic conventions discussed above (the role of nature, the attitude of society, the form of consolation, etc.) are also social concerns, the literary

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resonances do indeed guide a reader to an awareness of some of Redmond's social and political positions. His lack of concern with the theme of nature would suggest that his emphasis is more on the social implications in a racist society of Dumas' murder. And his final image of the widow playing with her children is a haunting portrait of a world lacking the consolation of Heaven.

I am in no doubt that this reading will differ sharply from what an Afro-American reading might be. All I can hope for is to have thrown some light on the poem and thus contributed to the effort to understand it. While it may well be the case that an insider, as Henderson says, "is the best qualified to judge," his judgement is of the literature as national literature. I approach it both as someone else's national literature and as an example of a literary text which belongs to a trans-national generic family.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

[1] Etheridge Knight, "Dark Prophesy: I Sing of Shine" in Understanding the New Black Poetry, ed., Stephen Henderson (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1973), p. 330.

[2] Mari Evans, "Where Have You Gone" in I am a Black Woman (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1970), p. 35.

[3] See Stephen Henderson, op. cit. Also Alvin Aubert, Black American Poetry: Its Language and Folk Tradition (Buffalo: Black Academy Press, 1971); Bernard Bell, The Folk Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1971); and Carolyn Rodgers, "Black Poetry - Where It's At," Negro Digest, Sept. 1969.

[4] Leroi Jones, Black Magic Poetry 1961-1967 (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1969), p. 47.

[5] Jones, p. 41.

[6] Jones, p. 47.

[7] See W. K. Wimsatt, The Verbal Icon (London: Methuen & Co., 1954), p. 69-83.

[8] Larry Neal, "Afterword," Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing (New York: William Morrow, 1968), p. 655.

[9] Jones, p. 116.

[10] Redmond's poem "Gods in Vietnam" was included in New Black Poets, ed., Clarence E. Brown (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969).

[11] Eugene Redmond, River of Bones and Flesh and Blood (East St. Louis: Black River Writers, 1971), p. 35.
(Subsequent references to this volume will be indicated in the text).

[12] Redmond, "Poetic Reflections Enroute to, and During, the Funeral and Burial of Henry Dumas, Poet," River of Bones and Flesh and Blood, p. 42.
See appendix B.

[13] Two examples which I refer to in this chapter are: Carolyn Rodgers, "Poems for Malcolm," Henderson, ed., p. 347 and Gwendolyn Brooks, "Malcolm X," Turner, ed., p. 262.

[14] John Milton, "Lycidas," The Norton Anthology of English Literature (New York: Norton & Co., 1962), vol. 1, p. 1341.

[15] W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," The Norton Anthology of English Literature (New York: Norton & Co., 1973), p. 741.

[16] Auden, "Musee des Beaux Arts," The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry, p. 740.

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CONCLUSION

There are two kinds of intertextuality between modern black writing and western literature. In many ways, Western writing can be said to have influenced modern black writing, but this influence is often, perhaps, always, opposed or counterbalanced by black traditions. There is a second less intentional intertextuality, resonances of various other kinds, that provides a route by which an outsider may approach a national and even a nationalist literature.

I choose to place the poetry of Eugene Redmond under this second heading. His work exemplifies one way in which an African reader equipped with some knowledge of Western literature but not having lived the Afro-American experience may nevertheless approach a certain kind of American black writing. The problem is a personal one. When Addison Gayle asserts that "to evaluate the life and culture of black people, it is necessary to live the experience,"[1] he is excluding not only white Americans, but other blacks who are not American, including, alas, myself. While Henderson provides a richer articulation of this position, he does however stop short of what is for this comparative study a very important issue: how to read and evaluate a text from another cultural or national tradition.

This problem arises not only when white people attempt to read works by black authors or vice versa. It arises also when black Africans read works by Afro-Americans or others outside their specific ethnic culture. Thus the African novelist and poet Kofi Awoonor has said that people who are not familiar with the religion and thought of his native Ewe group of Ghana should not touch his novel, This Earth My Brother.[2] There are many problems with this position. The first of them is simple and even slightly comical, but difficult to dismiss. Ethnic (tribal), national, and racial frontiers being what they are, Kofi Awoonor has by his remark suggested that his novel should not be touched by the majority of his fellow Ghanaians (who are non-Ewe), not to mention other Africans and Afro-Americans. Fortunately, his remarks have not stopped people from these other groups from reading his novel. Similarly, Addison Gayle's admonitions have not entirely discouraged outsiders to the American black experience from reading Afro-American writing. If Africans more removed from Afro-American reality than other Americans can understand the poems of Eugene Redmond then why not Canadians or Australians?[3] The usual response is that Afro-American culture, including literature, retains oral and folk traditions which go back to Africa and which are the common denominator of the black aesthetic. But this response ignores a vast truth: folk and oral traditions are only a part of modern black writing.

Henderson's more cautious statement of this position offers a helpful point of departure for assessing its merits and inadequacy. While making allowance for a pluralism of interpretations, he nevertheless insists that black people are "best qualified to judge" since black poetry is directed to them.[4] His concept of saturation can indeed be understood in these terms. It is these elements in the literary work which record the lived experience shared by the author and the intended audience; this is precisely the element which is inaccessible to an outsider. He is not concerned, as I am, with structures which enable an outsider to enter the literary work. In its extreme formulation outside of Henderson's work the desire to exclude outsiders repeats the fallacy that there is only one true meaning to a literary work; such a meaning would be available only to those for whom the writer intended the text. The historical version of this argument would claim that Shakespeare's true meaning is forever lost to us and that our aim as critics is to recover as much as possible the conditions in which Shakespeare wrote.[5] But just as we now know that the Elizabethan way of understanding a Shakespeare play (if indeed there ever was an accepted Elizabethan understanding) was only one of several possible interpretations of the works of Shakespeare, including for example Freudian or Marxian readings, so it is with black writing. What contemporary black critics think is the meaning of their literature is only one of its multiple possibilities of meaning. The validity of their reading rests on two factors: greater knowledge of the specifically black traditions in the text, and the lived experience which the reader shares with the writer. But the text is available to other readers by means of what it shares with other texts whether these resonances are conscious or not. I do not deny that value judgement based upon this principle of inter-textuality may be more respectable for most readers according to the extent to which that judgement also includes a knowledge of specifically black culture. The reading of an outsider is not necessarily a misunderstanding, but a revelation of another part of the work's many possibilities of meaning.

Needless to say the opposite position is a very attractive one especially to those who want to link literature with praxis. Literature in their view is about a specific historical situation with a strong diagnostic value and often a prescription for action. Thus Georg Lukács conceives of literature as a reconstitution of social reality which makes manifest the workings of its historical processes or economic relations. In this view, literature speaks most directly to those who belong to the social reality depicted.[6] A similar view animates Jean Paul Sartre's impatience with the classics.[7] The Black Arts Movement with Amiri Baraka as its leader saw literature in these terms, perhaps even more extremely so. The poem was to be a weapon in the fight against oppression, a means both of educating the black populace and inciting them to action. The literary text not only makes references to an external world, it also refers to and recalls other literary works. Rubadiri's "Stanley Meets Mutesa" not only points back to an event in African history, it also recalls "Journey of the Magi." In that particular instance, the intertextual reference is intended by the author, but this need not always be the case. Northrop Frye's work is an attempt to relate a vast body of literature on the strength of such internal affinities, regardless of author's intention. Even as familiarity with the social and historical situation provides one kind of access to the work, so the ability to relate it to other works provides a different kind of access. The richest acts of criticism combine the most judicious use of both approaches.

Thus I approach Redmond's "Poetic Reflections Enroute to....the Burial of Henry Dumas" as an outsider lacking the experience that would enable me to perceive or participate in saturation and therefore "simply know" "the truth" of the poem. I approach it therefore by the other means of access and place it within a family of poems in which the poet reflects upon a friend's death, poems such as "Lycidas" and "In Memoriam." This discovery of a common structure of argument in these poems provides a means of understanding and may serve as a basis of evaluation. The understanding and evaluation thus reached differ from those based on saturation as defined by Henderson. The approach is however useful for a cross-cultural comparatist. It is based on an internal density which may have some similarity to saturation, but includes more than a single national culture.

In discussing the problem of influence which is the other dimension of intertextuality discussed in this dissertation, I have sought to expose the short-sightedness of a Charles Larson or Robert Bone who assume that modern black writing derives totally from Western literature.[8] I reject equally a view which denies absolutely the presence of Western literature in modern black writing. A statement from Janheinz Jahn's Neo-African Literature: A History of Black Writing is a cogent summary of my position:

> Neo-African Literature, then, is heir to two traditions: traditional African literature and Western literature. A work which shows no European influences, including not being written down belongs to traditional African literature, not Neo-African. The boundary between the two is easy to draw: it is the boundary between oral and written literature. Conversely, a work which reveals no African stylistic features or patterns of expression belongs to Western, not neo-African literature, even if written by an African.[9]

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Not only Jahn but other recent commentators including Henderson, Saunders Redding and Eugene Redmond[10] have admitted the dualistic characteristic of modern black writing. What has been especially lacking is actual practical criticism based on this awareness. Jahn's own work has been more concerned with tracing African retentions in Afro-American literature than in pursuing fully the dualism mentioned above. His work is of immense value, just as Henderson's, for pointing to the uniquely black elements in modern black writing. However, a fuller discussion of modern black writing should examine these African and uniquely black elements as fused with elements which originate in the west.

My examination of some poems by Senghor and Walcott attempts the kind of investigation which must precede a fuller formulation of the nature of modern black writing, for in my discussion I assume that European poetic theory and practice are available to blacks and have been adopted by each of the poets. My discussion of Senghor centers on the nature of metaphor, especially metaphors which seek to describe the woman, the object of his love. By going to some traditional sources, I establish that the bulk of the traditional metaphors are "epiphoric," functioning in the rhetorical manner expounded by Aristotle whereby a name is transferred from that which it usually denotes to some other object, thus a woman is referred to as a fortress and the trope is supposed to reveal a quality she possesses. Secondly, the vehicles in such metaphors are usually drawn from the history and the quotidian life of the community, presupposing a view of the world as already available and shared by all; the poet is integrated within a socially given cosmos. In short, it is poetry for communal enjoyment.

My discussion of Senghor reveals the continuing relevance of this view of metaphor in his work and proves unequivocally that Senghor is an African poet. However, we also notice a number of significant ways in which he differs in terms of his use of metaphor from the traditional poet, for many of this metaphors are "diaphoric,"[11] metaphors which cannot be understood in terms of the simple transfer of the quality of the vehicle unto the tenor, functioning rather to suggest a quality for which there is no name and which the poem as metaphor can only approximate. This radically new direction in African poetry is derived from Senghor's study of post-Romantic French poetry. But even more important, for our purpose, is Senghor's technique of pressing the images drawn from traditional poetry to serve his new diaphoric function. A quality of the loved one is compared, in the manner of the traditional poem, with some object of publicly known value or emotional resonance, but the comparison is questioned, cast in doubt as though it were unintended so that only a suggestion is left. Philip Wheelwright has argued that a common way by which traditional poets sought after the diaphoric effect was through a succession of epiphoric images operating as a series of inadequate approaches towards describing an elusive subject, while nevertheless conveying a suggestion of its quality or subtle combination of qualities.[12] Senghor, being no traditional poet, functions rather differently. What he does is to insert the traditional images in a genuinely diaphoric atmosphere so that they can no longer be naturalized realistically by a simple process of substitution. The wealth of traditional images functions in some of Senghor's poetry as a store of suggestive imagery useful for their remote and bucolic aura than for any definitely descriptive value. Senghor thus links up with modern Western poetry in his use of metaphor and a good deal of the richness of his book is lost on one who is not conversant with the notion of the purely suggestive metaphor and wants his metaphors to be specific in what they say about the subject. His is a highly individualized use of images which are nevertheless African, coming, as they do, out of the traditional love and praise poems.

And what of Walcott? In what sense is he a black poet, given that but for the occasional experiment with the demotic dialect of his island[13] his models are entirely European? A remark by the Afro-American poet, Alice Walker, is apposite here.

> What ... is [missing] ... is a view of Mr. Walcott's West Indies that escapes the camouflage of an essentially European interpretation. Eager to know Mr. Walcott's West Indies, his island, his people, his greenness, his sea, I am disappointed that what he chooses to tell me comes hidden behind names from Greek myths I only half remember, or written in Latin I never studied, or so sprinkled with the "glories" of English empire days that I, finally, can recognize nothing without a debilitating struggle; but must pick my way laboriously from page to page, choosing bits and pieces that speak to me and leaving the rest for the dons of Oxford.[14]

Walcott's prolific use of allusion and quotation means that, as far as he is concerned, the body of literature written in English and French is a part of his heritage, and the real question is whether in adopting European models he also succeeds in doing something unique - unique to him as an individual, West Indian poet. I have identified Eliot's "Gerontion" as a central model for Walcott, providing an appropriate genre - a theme and a related set of images. It is not hard to understand why such a poem would be attractive to a West Indian poet: it is a poem of alienation, about the loss of a primordial condition of bliss and a fall into a present condition of torment, a very appropriate metaphor for the West Indian who sees himself as having been uprooted from Africa, or India and fallen into a present normless no-man's land; the near total reliance on European models being itself a consequence of having to create out of this no-man's land - for even according to the revolutionary Frantz Fanon, the West Indian has two cultural options: "the great black mirage" (Africa) or "the great white error" (Europe).[15]

Walcott does, however, deviate from his models in significant ways, indeed in ways which sometimes confront directly the kinds of criticisms raised by Alice Walker. "The Saddhu of Couva" is a case in point. Again the voice is that of an old man deploring a present of spiritual aridity in which symbols of faith are inverted and rendered meaningless, and looking back to a time in the past when the sea of faith was at full tide. The signs of the present decay are, as in Eliot, the mechanical things which in their brash loudness drown the quiet voice of the spirit. And again as in Eliot, the old man feels terror at the meaning of a life without faith and resigns in the end to a bitter vision of life as a brief spark "blowing through the smoke of night." And of course Walcott's image of the old man's soul as a white cattle bird flying unsuccessfully "across the ocean of cane behind Couva" is very clearly a version of Eliot's:

> .... Gull against the wind, in the windy straits
> Of Belle Isle, or running on the Horn,
> White feathers in the snow, the Gulf claims, ...[16]

Yet Walcott's poem is nothing if not Caribbean - nor is it simply a matter of making substitutions. The texture of his poem is different, containing a great wealth of social details which also are symbols within his vision of the islands - the sugar cane plantations are, of course, the vast commercial enterprise in which spirituality is drowned, the cinema posters, the maroon taxi, the loudspeakers in front of the stores (probably blaring Reggae music) are all realistic details which in their cheapness, their loudness and brightness also function as symbols of the crudeness, the lack of depth of the society. Another difference is Walcott's use of humor which is a new element in the genre, making his poem less painful even as it intensifies the resignation to faithlessness.

> .....the mosquitos whine their evening mantras,
> My friend, Anopheles, on the sitar.

And finally, of course, in this poem, Walcott, because it is appropriate for creating the illusion of a West Indian speaking voice, attempts to reproduce the syntax of popular West Indian English. It is thus clear that while Walcott may borrow the spectacles of Eliot to look on the West Indies, he does adjust the focus and offer a dilemma that is authentically West Indian.

But Walcott's relation to Eliot leads naturally to a topic which I had initially sought to exclude from the perimeters of this discussion. The reason Walcott uses Eliot as a model is now clear. They both look upon human life in terms of the same family of ideas, in terms of the same myth of the loss of Eden. However much the historical causes of Eliot's alienation may differ from Walcott's, in their literary statements one is a version of the other. Eliot and Walcott both cut through the adventitious layering of historical circumstance to reach true emotional and existential signficances of pariticular situations. Both poets share the archetypalist intention to lay bare the mythic outlines of everyday life. This is clearly part of the reason why Eliot himself was so allusive. Again, we are back at the vexed question of the universality of literature, its superiority over history which Aristotle pointed out many centuries ago.

There are, as I have tried to show, diverse ways in which Black and European writing, in our time, interpenetrate, making the task of establishing a Black Aesthetic more complex than the efforts that have thus far been made. It is clear that the black person who would enjoy Walcott or most comprehensively read Redmond's "Elegy" needs to do as much homework on the "mainstream" as the white person who wants to read Okigbo or Baraka needs to do on African and Afro-American culture. Valuable work has been done in showing the elements from the folk traditions which recur in modern black writing, but criticism of modern black writing must go a stage further in showing how these folk traditions have been altered or fused with forms and ideas which derive from Europe. Perhaps, indeed, the only useful general observation that can be made of the Black Aesthetic concerns its two-handedness. Each black writer seems to have his own preferences as to what elements from either source that he wishes to work with and in what proportion. In time, genres based on this dualism will evolve. Meanwhile, the job of criticism is to be sensitive to both sources and to evaluate the work as a happy fusion. Finally, the claim that no outsiders can make valuable comments on black literature is untenable: not only each reader, but each group of readers possesses prejudices which make it difficult, indeed impossible, to encompass the full meaning of any literary work. This meaning is continually unfolding and is the subejct of a discussion to which all groups - even races, for those who value the concept - are not necessarily unfree to make a contribution.

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NOTES TO THE CONCLUSION

[1] Quoted in Michael Popkin, ed., Modern Black Writers (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1978), p. vii.

[2] Kofi Awoonor, "Interview" in Palaver, ed. Bernth Lindfors, Richard Priebe and Richard Sander (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1972).

[3] It is important to remember that the word, "black" is often used by Afro-Americans to refer to Black American as opposed to White American. Used this way, it does not include African blacks. Thus the Black Arts Movement is specifically Afro-American literary movement which sought to serve the Afro-American political activities of the sixties.

[4] Henderson, p. 10.

[5] For a concise formulation of this problem, see Donald Marshall's review of E. D. Hirsch, Jr., The Aims of Interpretation in Philosophical Quarterly, vol. 56, Summer 1977.

[6] Georg Lukács, Writer and Critic (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1970), p. 34ff.

[7] Jean-Paul Sartre, What is Literature, Bernard Frechtman, trans. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), p. 73.

[8] See Charles Larson, The Emergence of African Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971) and Robert A. Bone, The Negro Novel in America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965).

[9] Janheinz Jahn, Neo-African Literature: A History of Black Writing (New York: Grove Press, 1968), p. 22.

[10] Henderson, p. 29, writes:

> One must admit that typographically at least contemporary Black poets have been greatly influenced by white poets and frequently admit it, at least the older ones do.

Eugene Redmond, Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry (New York: Anchor, 1976), p. 8, makes this remark:

> The thorough student of black poetry will steep himself in the history of Western Civilization; he will develop an appreciation for the complex web of black-white interrelationships in America. All this is necessary in preparing to participate fully and knowledgeably in the often tension-filled readings and discussions stimulated by the works of black poets and critics.

[11] I borrow these terms from Philip Wheelwright, Metaphor and Reality (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), p. 72.

[12] Wheelwright, p. 87.

[13] For example, "Parang" and the sixth poem of the sequence, "Tales of the Islands" in Selected Poems (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Co., 1962).

[14] Quoted in Popkin, ed., p. 240.

[15] Frantz Fanon, Toward the African Revolution, trans., Haaku Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1968), p. 27.

[16] Eliot, "Gerontion," Selected Poems (New York: Harcourt Brace & World Inc., 1964), p. 33.

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APPENDIX B

ANGEL OF MERCY

(for Angela Yvonne Davis)

> *"...for if they take you in*
> *the morning they will be coming*
> *for us that night."*
>
> — James Baldwin

Trials! Trials!
Another *trial!*
Another *trial* in the trek towards Sun-center
Towards Sun-song and Son-song and Songhay
Towards *yestermorrow*.

AngelAngelAngelAngel*Angela*:

anvil & arrow
anvil & arrow
anvil & arrow
Anviling & arrowing wind into *word*: impaled on the
pitchfork of urgency!
(America is a pitchfork!)

African winds/words call & caucus your co-queens:

Shango's wives
Sojourner Truth
Harriet Tubman
Mary Bethune
Katherine Dunham
Aretha Franklin

Trials! Trials! One more river to cross!!
Angela *Our* Angel of mercy!
Angela *Our* Angel of mercy!
Angela *Our* Angel of mercy!

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Word-winged warrior: thrust-thrust-thrust—
Beat back the be-robed beasts
Fly Black flame-lances to the gates of
    Ghana
    Harlem
    Haiti
    Fillmore
    Senegal
    Watts
    Congo
    Chicago

Mojo the jelly-minded jurists!
Drop goober dust on canopies and sun-porches of the mind!
Thrust-thrust-thrust:
Unbroken ebony bird shuttling ancestral urgencies!

Trials! Trials!
We beat them back back back:

one-by-one one-by-one one-by-two-by-one-by-two
one-by-one one-by-one one-by-two-by-one-by-two
one-by-one one-by-one one-by-two-by-one-by-two

(Forgive them that *deny* & *decry*. Pray *later* for those sinners!)

Trials! Trials!

Night is on trial.

Day is on trial.

Color is convicted.

Dusky skin will get you 5 to life:
  ask Marcus
  ask Malcolm
  ask Martin

Ask the Angel of Mercy!

"Electrocute all ideas!!"
"Burn & gas the thinkers!!"
"Napalm the dissenters!!"

  ...thus spake the pentagods!

Euro-America, *once more*, saved, fairy-tale-fashion,
From the fire & brimstone of diarrhea:
From the lava of its cavernous intestines.

Angela, Sacrifice for perennial witch-hunt.
Angela: One more river to cross;
One more river of blood to cross;
One more cross to anvil into a spear;
One more steeple to shape into a sword;
No more crosses to bear!

Angela, One more, One more, One more river to cross!!!

APPENDIX B

POETIC REFLECTION ENROUTE TO, AND DURING, THE FUNERAL AND BURIAL OF HENRY DUMAS, POET*

I

FLIGHT TO NEW YORK

"I am ready to die"
Henry Dumas in *"Our King is Dead,"* 1968.

A passive sea of white foam
Separates this swift and fleshless bird
From the black earth that waits for *Henry Dumas, poet.*
At 30,000 feet up
The mind has plenty of space to wander:

Just think!
A second-story world –
No steps, no ladders.
Meanwhile onto aluminum-covered wings the sun leaps
And breaks into a thousand heated needles
As my head averts,
With a twist,
Its stabbing, staring presence.

Now we soar through angry winds,
Bouncing unpredictably like a football
Turned loose in some smooth, open place.
But the pilot guides the bird cautiously
Through the ordeal while our hearts,
At first hung like anxious medallions around our necks,
Resume their natural places;
And the cries, before dignifiedly choked,
Die forever in our throats.

We the living:
Are we some majestic, royal party?
A high tribunal judging the lower world?
Gods?
Who is above and who is below?
...the pilot's voice and then
A view of Staten Island.

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We nose through the second sea to caress LaGuardia Field.
The stewardess smiles at the passenger sitting
Alone in the rear: "Pretty good landing in the rain,
wasn't it?"
She's a company girl, the poet muses — a robot with nice legs.
Parts and pieces of the painful puzzle fall together on the
ground.
But I must hurry to the funeral in the Bronx.
Amid sounds and sights, I near the cap and am terrified
at my image
In the glossy surface of its wet body.

And on the way to McCall Funeral Home
I try in vain to figure out who I am.

II.

THE FUNERAL

"A Black Poet is a preacher."
Statement by Henry Dumas, 1968.

The balding black preacher
Read and ad-libbed
Before a lamp that threw
A cone-shaped light up into his face.
The eulogy was brief,
The man was eloquent and magnificent
In dark robes: *a poet saluting a poet.*
Occasionally his eyes fell
Like heavy weights
On the casket to his right,
Draped in a United States flag.
Dumas had served in the Air Force.
The articulate preacher had not known the poet
But the poet's mother.
One could see that the circumstances of the killing
Had undermined his faith.

He sought a way out: Equating the poet with "Mr.
Lincoln."
He also knew the poet wrote:
"This young man will survive
In his stories and poems," the bowed audience was
reminded.
"He walked upright like a man...
There are mysteries; life is a mystery,
Death is a mystery."
The radiant black man of cloth
Was unpretentious; he broke with tradition — promising
No alternatives to death.

Seemingly unaware of heaven or hell, he suggested simply
"a last resting place."
Those in the chapel stared intently, bleakly
Into their own thoughts.
Outside the skies cried for the dead black bard.

III.

FORTY-FIVE MINUTES TO THE CEMETERY

Rain,
Earlier in East St. Louis and now in New York.
The skies continue to mourn for the fallen poet and warrior,
Priest and prophet.

Four passengers in the fourth car,
Divided by a generation of intellect,
But feeling a common pain,
A mutual bewilderment:
Four grim faces of the oppressed.

The dead poet rode in the first car
But was present in the whole train:
Smiling in approval at our candid talk.
Dumas was like. "Man, let's just tell it," he used to say.
Yes, and he had given direction to the
Pen of the younger poet earlier that morning —
Several stories up, adrift in a big bird of steel.

Our talk was shop:
"Henry and I finished Commerce High School together,"
The driver intimated.
A middleage friend of the poet's mother said:
"They're killing off all our good men; I tell ya, a black man
Today speaks his piece at the risk of losing his life."

New Yorkers talk differently than East St. Louisans.
The young poet observed to himself.

The cars of the procession,
Standing out with bright eyes agains the dim day,
Sped cautiously toward Farmingdale National Cemetery
Where white marble headstones stood mute and macabre:
Quite geometrically arranged in a sprawling well kept
ocean of green.

Again talk: "They're slaughtering our boys in Vietnam,"
the middleage lady
Quipped; "this graveyard will be filled up soon."
A bus carrying the Army Honor Guard joined us at the
entrance to the cemetery.

The guard gave a trifling, sloppy salute to the fallen poet
Who had served his country.
More talk as we departed the graveside:
"Young David walks just like his daddy,"
The driver informed us about Dumas' eldest son.

"Neither of the boys understand what's going on,"
The driver's mother noted.
"Who does?" the young poet asked himself.

A confession from the middleage lady: "Can't cry no more.
Just won't no more tears come out — all dried up."
Her eyes looked like worn rubies, inquisitive jewels
Polished to worn perfection
By having seen many things
Including the dead poet's "good-looking," as she puts it,
remains.
The driver echoed her: "Henry was beautiful; he looked
Just like he was asleep."

The driver was a spirit lifter, also an observer:
"Henry thought too deep for the average person."

Upon leaving the cemetery
The procession broke up.
Cars bearing license plates from various places sped on or
turned off,
Went this way and that way.

The skies lifted their hung heads.
Mrs. Dumas smiled finally and played with her sons,
David and Michael.
The boys, cast in the same physical mold as their father,
Were impeccably dressed.

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*Note: Henry Dumas was shot to death by a white policeman in a New York subway on May 23, 1968, just before his 34th birthday. Two collections of his works, *'Ark of Bones' and Other Stories* and *Poetry For My People* were published in 1970 by Southern Illinois University Press.

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